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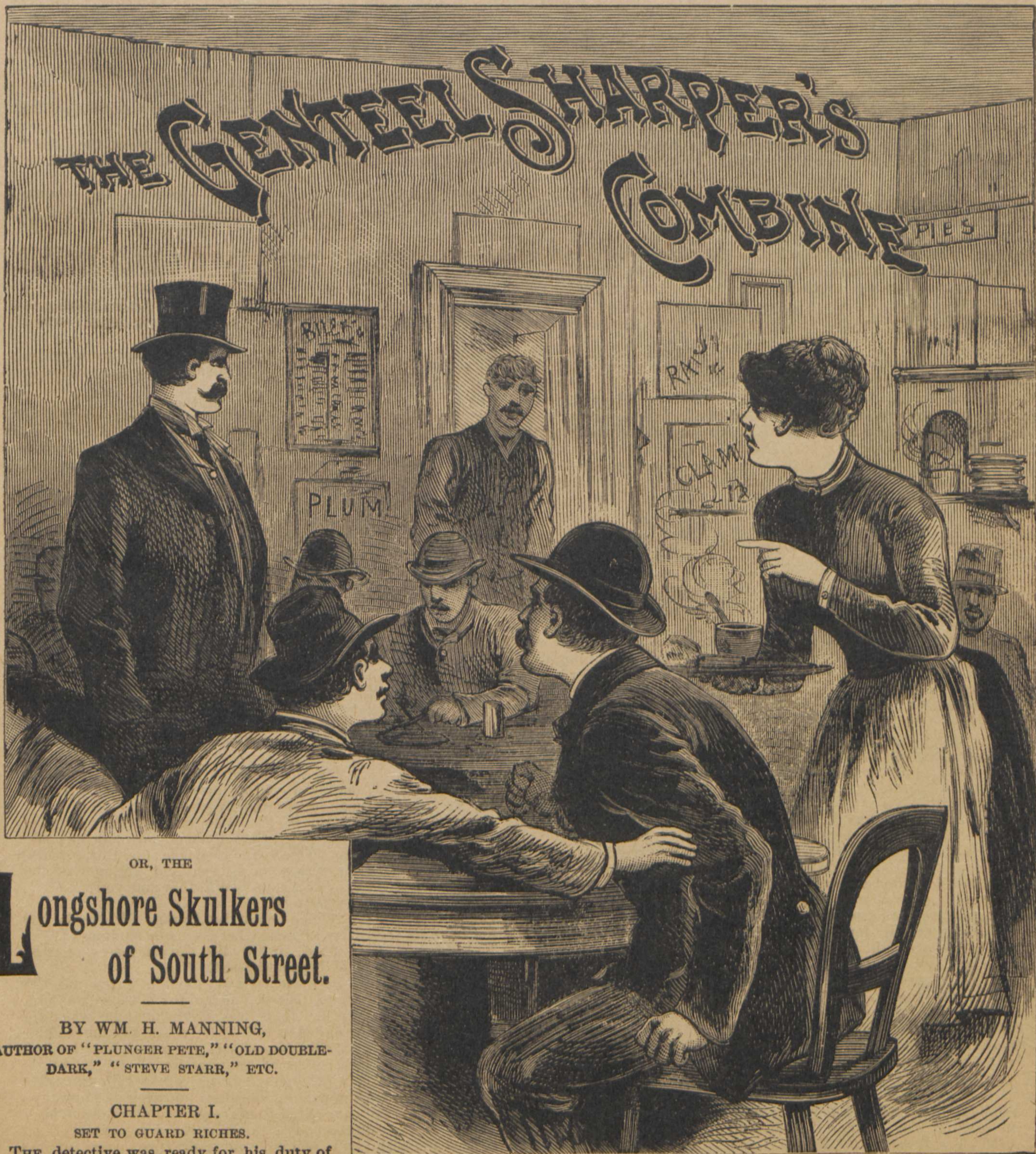
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OR, THE Longshore Skulkers of South Street.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "PLUNGER PETE," "OLD DOUBLE-
DARK," "STEVE STARR," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SET TO GUARD RICHES.

THE detective was ready for his duty of the evening. It was one requiring fidelity on his part, but that it was to be more no-

"NIBSY," THE DETECTIVE ANSWERED, "GO LIGHT, THAT IS THE VERY MAN WE ARE HUNTING!"

body supposed to be the case. There was nothing to tell of the crime, scheming and suffering that was to follow.

Nathaniel Cooledge had been received by the master of the house in person. They had met before, so there was no need of an introduction.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Cooledge," remarked Walton Lynnfield. "Your coming, however, reminds me that I must mix business with the pleasure of the evening."

"That is bad, sir," answered the detective. "Your guests all seem merry, and you ought not to lose your share."

"I can endure it. Old people have to bear the brunt of all things, while young ones devote their attention to pleasure only. Still, I am as happy as the rest of them. My daughter is to make a good marriage, and she is happy. So am I, then, for she is all in all to me."

Nathaniel Cooledge glanced through the door and surveyed the assembled guests. It was a notable gathering, as he could well see.

"Now," pursued Mr. Lynnfield, "I think you understand your duties of the evening."

"I am to guard certain jewels which are to be presented to Miss Lynnfield when she has become Mrs. Robert Houston."

"Yes. Do you know the value of these jewels?"

"I am told they are very valuable."

"They are, to the extent of half a million dollars."

The detective's face told no tales, but he had learned in his professional career that the best of men were often inclined to exaggerate in the matter of values; not necessarily through design, but through misapprehension, if nothing more. Betraying no doubt, Mr. Cooledge now expressed polite wonder.

"Indeed! That is a princely sum."

"Your term is not far out of the way. The jewels, sir, are queenly jewels."

"By descent?"

"Yes. They once belonged to the Empress Josephine, the ill-fated consort of the great Napoleon."

"Then you name them well when you say they are queenly jewels."

"Let me explain briefly. They were, as before said, the property of Josephine, and almost daily were worn by her. Among the ladies of her court was the Duchess Lafontaine. It was the good fortune of the latter to be dearly loved by Josephine. More, it was her good fortune, later, to do the empress a great favor. As a result the jewels were presented to her by Josephine. You will excuse me if I do not mention the nature of the favor, but it is well known to us."

"The duchess was fortunate."

"More so than her royal mistress, sir. Time has passed, however, and, of course, the duchess is dead. She left no heirs nearer than her sister's children, so the jewels fell to the Count Altamonte, and my late wife was a sister of the count."

"I begin to see."

"Naturally. Well, when the count learned that my daughter, Vivian, was to be married, he decided to give the jewels to her, and it will be done to-night. Now, let me take you to the count."

"So he is here?"

"He personally brought the precious jewels across the water, accompanied by trusty friends of his household. Kindly follow me."

Mr. Lynnfield led the way, and the detective was conducted to an old gentleman, whose snow-white hair told of advanced years, but whose athletic form was still upright, and whose eyes still gleamed with the fire of younger days.

"Count Altamonte," spoke Lynnfield, "allow me to introduce to you Mr. Cooledge, the gentleman engaged for the evening."

The old gentleman at once gave the gracious attention of a man of high breeding. He took Nathaniel's hand quickly.

"Monsieur," he exclaimed, "it gives me pleasure to meet you. We are gathered for a delightful occasion, and you have an important part to play. I am delighted to see that the actor is worthy of the part, and that we are all gentlemen here."

He bowed with profound courtesy, and the

detective, accustomed to all ranks and nations of men, did not fail to make due reply.

"We can trust the jewels with Cooledge," added Lynnfield, in an undertone.

"I feel sure of it. Monsieur, these jewels are much to us. Long in our family, they are inexpressibly dear because they were once the property of the Empress Josephine."

"I can understand your feelings."

"Hapless queen."

"Hers was a sad life, count."

"It was, indeed, and the jewels which have come down to us are dear from many causes. Their value is, in your money, half a million dollars. This is why I insisted upon having a detective here to guard them until the evening is over and I have formally presented them to Miss Vivian Lynnfield. Then my care of them ceases, and your own task will be begun."

"They will be secure while he watches them," added Lynnfield. "No officer on the New York police force ranks higher than Nathaniel Cooledge. It was because of that I selected him."

"Monsieur," pursued the count, "it is detestable to talk cold business with one of your appearance, but business has its claims. Allow me to repeat what Mr. Lynnfield has, of course, told you, that you will be well paid for your services of the evening."

"I am satisfied, count, and I will try to be argus-eyed."

"No doubt; I know your reputation. I am told—Ah! your pardon, Oakes; I did not see you before. Mr. Detective, this is my good friend, Monsieur Barrington Oakes."

Another guest had approached the group. Cooledge had noticed him casually; he now surveyed him more closely. He was a person of thirty-five years, it seemed, and tall and muscular of build. He had unusually dark complexion, and his hair and mustache were black, but there was a clearness about his face rarely seen in one so dark. Some might have called him handsome, but Cooledge experienced a peculiar feeling of dislike of the man.

Barrington Oakes gave his hand cordially.

"I am glad to see you, sir," he declared. "Count Altamonte's friends are my friends."

"Well said, monsieur; well said! We know your way, and blood will tell. Monsieur Oakes, will you accompany us to the room where we exhibit the jewels to Mr. Cooledge?"

"With pleasure."

The four went together.

In a smaller room they found a table with a casket upon it. Several persons were in the room, evidently there to do guard until the regular service in that line began. They fell back as the others entered.

Walton Lynnfield walked to the table.

"Here are the jewels, Mr. Cooledge," he announced.

He opened the casket.

The blaze of light which met the detective's eyes was absolutely dazzling. In his professional career he had been brought in contact with notable jewels, but nothing like what he now saw. The gleams of light were marvelous. He was not an enthusiast in anything, but he felt like worshiping these sparkling objects. Even his breathing quickened.

Lynnfield smiled.

"Well?" he questioned.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" ejaculated Cooledge.

"You see they are no common diamonds."

"They are not, indeed."

"We have told you their value."

They had told him. If he was now called upon to judge as to the correctness of their estimate he certainly would not have set the figures at half a million, but he lost a part of his doubt. Whatever they might bring, if offered in open market, there was no denying that they were remarkable for both splendor and value.

"Here is another who should see them," added Lynnfield. "Mr. Cooledge, let me introduce Miss Adrienne Everley, a young lady connected with one of our great dailies as a reporter, and sent to write up this marriage of ours. Miss Everley, permit me to show you the gems."

Cooledge had glanced casually at the lady to whom he was introduced. He saw a person still on the bright side of thirty, and one

who had a figure of magnificent proportions, though many would have deemed her too large for one of her sex. She had a strong, firm face, and Cooledge was ready to believe that she was of a mind fitted to earn her living in masculine employments, if she saw fit.

She smiled first upon Mr. Cooledge, and then upon her host.

"Thank you for the offer, Mr. Lynnfield," she answered, "but Miss Lynnfield has given me the view already. The jewels are magnificent. I am trying to think of terms suitable for a description of them in the press."

The master of the house smiled his appreciation and forgot to urge the point. Miss Adrienne Everley did not go nearer to the gems.

"It is singular," observed Barrington Oakes, "that a newspaper of this generation should print mention of the jewels worn by the Empress Josephine, and now given to a bride."

"The hapless Josephine, the hapless Josephine!" sighed the count.

"Fine as they are," continued Oakes, "they are only a match for what else Mr. Lynnfield has here. Mr. Cooledge, allow me to call your attention to the painting yonder. It is as fine a historical thing as I ever saw. Who painted it, Mr. Lynnfield? Move to one side a little, ladies and gentlemen, and let the light fall at its best. There! Is it not fine?"

"The grand, the magnificent!" declared Count Altamonte.

"It is by Jan Van der Meer, the elder," explained Lynnfield. "I purchased it in Amsterdam."

"It is superb," declared the count. "Monsieur Cooledge, notice the fidelity of expression on all those faces. Ah! grand, grand!"

It was a fine painting, but Cooledge was not an enthusiast, and gave heed only because his companions and employers willed it so. Everybody had something complimentary to say, but even the merits of the work were exhausted at last.

"The hour wanes!" cried the count, with a start. "Gentlemen, let us complete our work here."

He had turned to the table, and he now locked the casket. Handing the key to Lynnfield, he added:

"You can finish the duty, monsieur."

"Nothing remains but to place the casket formally in charge of Mr. Cooledge. I think, Cooledge, that you understand your duty—it is simply to remain here, never leaving the casket for one second, and watch until we come to convey the contents to Miss Lynnfield."

"Mrs. Houston," amended the count.

"True. When we come my daughter will be Mrs. Houston."

"I accept the trust," replied the detective, "but on one condition."

"And that?"

"Is that I may have a companion watcher."

"Why?"

"If there is half a million there, the watcher should be watched."

"Nonsense, Cooledge! Your high reputation—"

"Is not a point in question. This is a matter of cold business, and I must have the man, appointed by you."

"So be it. Who shall it be? Zounds! who better than Cyrus Ames, my old servant? He has served me for thirty years, and is as honest, keen and vigilant as the eyes of Argus. Will that suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"Then let it be Cyrus. Where is he? Here, James! Let Cyrus be summoned!"

"Yes, sir," replied the other servant, who had been addressed.

He hastened away, and in a few minutes a gray-haired, fine-looking old man was produced. This was Cyrus, and he was duly installed as the detective's aid in the watch.

This done, all left the room but the two guardians of the treasure.

Cooledge's sole object in calling for this companion was that, knowing so much was committed to his care, he determined to have somebody else share the responsibility, and had secured an accredited agent of his employer. All this was well.

The rest of the party had gone to witness

the marriage ceremony, but they were kept waiting. They were a little ahead of time, and the clergyman of the occasion was somewhat late."

The guests were standing around with the expressions of partial idiocy on their faces which everybody seems to feel called upon to wear at a wedding, when the mental inanity of the present occasion was rudely and abruptly dispelled.

From the hall came a servant whose eyes were big and frightened, whose face was pale, and whose whole manner was one of dismay and extreme agitation.

He stopped and reached out a hand in an erratic gesture.

"Murder has been done!" he cried, in a shrill voice.

The announcement fell heavily on the party, prepared only for joy and pleasure. They experienced a feeling as though chilled by an Arctic breath, but the servant did not wait for questions before adding:

"Thomas lies dead by the back-yard door; he has been murdered!"

Walton Lynnfield flushed with anger.

"Fellow, are you intoxicated?" he demanded, sharply.

"I never drink a drop, and if you don't believe me you can go and see. I tell you Thomas is dead, and murdered at that."

There were other pale faces there then. Delicate women were of the party, and the announcement fell upon them severely. It needed but one glance to see that the whole assemblage had been taken out of the realm of the peaceful and happy into confusion and terror.

Not yet did Lynnfield know whether he believed the report, and he was very angry that the servant should have been so precipitate and thoughtless in his revelation, and he pushed forward, shoving the man into the hall.

"You fool! what is all this?" he demanded.

"Look for yourself. Thomas is dead, and murdered!"

CHAPTER II.

ASTOUNDING DISCOVERIES.

THE guard over the casket remained faithfully at their post. One, at least, had no desire to be elsewhere; Nathaniel Cooledge did not find it an object of especial interest that Miss Vivian Lynnfield was to be married that night.

The detective and the old servant sat facing each other, with the table and the casket always between them. Cooledge was a social man, and he chatted as they waited, much to the pleasure of the servant.

"A fine man!" thought Cyrus Ames.

The minutes passed on and they remained the sole occupants of the room. At last, however, there was a sound of quick steps outside the door and Count Altamonte rushed into their presence.

Just then he did not look like one who came to announce a happy marriage. His face was flushed and excited, and his manner nervous.

"Monsieur, monsieur, you are wanted below!"

He addressed Cooledge precipitately, and the detective was surprised. He glanced at the casket.

"Why am I wanted?"

"Murder has been done!"

"Murder?"

"Yes."

"By whom? Who is killed?"

"A servant is the victim—we know not the rest. The man lies dead by the rear door; we know no more. He has been killed silently; and the assassin has escaped. It is your trade to hunt such men—go and take charge of this case!"

"Let me be sure that I understand," replied Cooledge, his manner, quiet and self-contained, contrasting sharply with the excitement of the count. "Do I understand that a servant has been found dead—murdered—and that the assassin has got off, and that nobody knows who he was?"

"That is just it, monsieur. We were all together, waiting for the clergyman to come, when a servant burst in with the dreadful tidings. The fool made the announcement public, so all the guests are in dismay, and many of them are hysterical. Outside, the

servant lies dead. Why was he killed? Who killed him? We know not. Go—go, monsieur, and solve this dreadful mystery. Go!"

He had taken the detective by the shoulder and was gently trying to push him away, but Cooledge calmly glanced at the object on the table.

"The casket!" he reminded.

"I will care for that. Go!"

"One moment. This collection of jewels has been put in my charge under conditions which make me morally, if not financially responsible for their safety. Before I leave them I must resign them as formally as I received them."

"The delay—"

"Will be but momentary."

"What do you wish, monsieur?"

"You took the key. Have you got it now?"

"Yes."

"Open the casket, and let me have proof that the contents remain as when I was placed in charge."

"This is an unnecessary precaution, for we are confident of your ability, but it shall be as you say. Here, monsieur!"

The count hurriedly produced the key. His hand trembled so he fitted the key with difficulty, for he remembered the dead man at the door, but he was not long delayed. He snapped the bolt back and raised the cover.

"Now, monsieur, go. Go, and—*Mon Dieu!*"

The count stood dumfounded, and the faces of Cooledge and Cyrus echoed the cry of amazement and terror which escaped his lips.

The casket was empty! !

Not a jewel was to be seen!

Silence fell upon the party. Nathaniel Cooledge was a cool hand, but, for once, he was taken so by surprise that he was speechless. He would have staked his life on the supposed fact that the jewels were in the casket, yet not one was to be seen. They had vanished as completely as if they had been things of a dream.

Slowly, torpidly the amazed count turned his gaze toward his companions.

"What—what—"

The words were only a mumbling, and they died away wholly.

Nathaniel Cooledge's eyes gleamed suddenly. Was this all a trick on him? Were these people seeking cheap notoriety? The idea was in his mind for a moment, but it was dismissed as unworthy of notice.

"What mistake is this?" he demanded.

"This is not the same casket—"

"There is but one casket," gasped the count.

"Then, where are the jewels?"

"Who has been here since we left the room?"

"Not a soul but ourselves."

"That is true," added Cyrus.

"Then how came the jewels missing?"

"They could not have been in the casket when we took charge. We have sat here as you found us, the one on one side and the other opposite him. We have not once moved; we have not once taken our eyes off from the casket."

"That is so," declared Cyrus.

Altamonte ran his fingers through the empty box. He was still a little dazed, and found it hard to believe the truth.

"Not a gem here," he muttered.

"Count, the casket was empty when we took charge," repeated the detective. "It could not have been robbed since."

"But, you saw the gems in it, yourself."

"They were somehow taken out."

"How could they be?"

"That I don't know."

"We were all of us around the casket all the while."

"And among those around it was one who was both dishonest and light-fingered. It seems impossible, yet I know it has been done. The box was robbed under our very eyes. The key was turned on an empty box."

"The gems are gone! Oh! the hapless Josephine! *Mon Dieu!* why do we stand here idle? Gone, gone? No, no; it cannot be!—it shall not be! Gone? Why, it is a loss of half a million! They are here!—they are somewhere here. We will find them!"

The stupor was cast off, and the full realization of the magnitude of the loss came to the Frenchman. He grew like one wild; he ran about the room and peered into corners in an absurd way. Disconnected words fell strangely from his lips, and the detective discovered tears actually stealing down his cheeks.

Cooledge had been almost as much dazed as his companions, but he, too, now aroused.

"Go for your master, Cyrus," he directed.

"The murdered man—"

Count Altamonte wheeled with almost fierce protest.

"Let the murdered man wait!" he cried, sharply. "What is a dead man to this unparalleled misfortune? Half a million! *Mon Dieu!* let the dead man wait!—bring your master here. Go, go! Unfeeling clod! will you go?"

Cyrus was not strikingly slow, but the excitable count seized him and almost hurled him out of the room. Cyrus demurred no longer; he went for his master.

The detective stared at the casket. He could not understand the robbery, but he did know it had not taken place during his own guardianship. Somebody had committed the act while the whole party was around the table—impossible as this seemed, it had been done.

Altamonte continued to tear wildly around the room, but Lynnfield soon came. He had been told of the new calamity, and his face was pale, but he brought American firmness as an offset to the count's wild vehemence. Rapid words passed between the trio, and then he knew all that was known to his companions.

"This is an awful calamity!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Lynnfield, who is the thief?"

"Who could it have been?"

"I do not know your people."

"There is no thief among them."

"Then how did the jewels go out of sight?"

"Great heavens! I don't know."

"And where is the thief now?"

"He has had ample time to escape."

"Further, what is all this talk about a dead man?"

"I had forgotten him. Thomas Smith one of my servants, is murdered."

"By whom?"

"We do not know."

"Was there no quarrel?"

"None at all, and no sound. All was done in utter stillness."

"Unseen?"

"Yes. Not one of the other servants knows how it was done, or by whom."

"Find the murderer and you will find the thief!"

"Ha! do you think—"

"Thomas was killed either to let the thief in, or to let him out!"

"By Jove! I believe you are right."

"Show me the dead man. It does not need an expert to guard this casket now."

Count Altamonte wrung his hands.

"It is an appalling loss!" he bewailed.

"Oh! the hapless Josephine—oh! the ill-fated jewels!"

There was nothing weak in this lament. The count had his way, and a florid flow of language, but he was not weak of mind or action. He simply was not an American and he was a man of one idea—the jewels were to him the universe around which everything else revolved.

Cooledge and Lynnfield hastened down to the basement, while Altamonte stayed and made the casket his universe still.

Down by the door which led to the back-yard a group of servants was gathered. Just beyond them was what had been one of their number when the first wedding guest arrived. Now, it was only a lifeless form.

Nathaniel Cooledge stood over the dead man.

The body lay face upward, and in a pool of blood.

"Where is the wound?" asked the detective.

"He was stabbed in the back," explained Lynnfield.

"A coward's blow!" cried one of the servants.

"Was it unseen by all of you?" asked the detective.

"None of us saw it, sir."

"Who found the body?"

"I did, sir."

"It was—where?"

"Just where you see it now; close to the door. It has only been moved as we turned him over to see what the trouble was. We think he fell face forward, after being stabbed in the back."

"Who did the deed?"

CHAPTER III.

AFTER THE TRAGEDY.

THE servant shook his head.

"Nobody knows who did it, sir. Poor Thomas had not an enemy in the world, and who could have hurt such a man?"

"Who was near when it was done?" pursued Nathaniel.

"We were all scattered about the premises, but we don't know just when it happened, and as we were all on the move we can't say who was nearest."

"Did none of you hear anything?"

"Not a sound."

"Nor see a stranger around here?"

"Nobody, sir."

The detective asked no more, but walked out into the yard. He made a tour of the inclosure, and then returned. His manner was grave and wholly unreadable. He had recovered from the shock he had sustained, and was himself again.

"Mr. Lynnfield," he then said, "we can not help this dead man. I suggest that you send to the nearest police station to have them take charge of the remains. In the meanwhile, we may as well go up to the floor above."

Lynnfield aroused. He had not been thinking of the dead man, but of the strangely-missing jewels. The hope was in his mind that the latter might be safe, much as he was worried by their absence. Now he caught at the chance to turn their attention from a mere man to the other mystery.

"Quite right," he agreed. "James, do you go to the station and summon the officers."

The speaker and Cooledge went upstairs.

"What do you make of it?" asked Lynnfield, quickly. "Who do you think did it?"

"I don't know. Even Thomas did not see the assassin."

"No?"

"No."

"How can you tell?"

"His expression is peaceful. Death came upon him suddenly, and without the accompaniment of terror one would feel if he realized his danger. I will amend my assertion that Thomas did not see him by saying that Thomas did not know of his danger. He was struck in the back, suddenly and surely. The slayer then went to the yard, mounted upon a box and vaulted over the fence to the adjacent yard."

"How do you know that?"

"There is a box in the yard; it has been moved recently. The fence shows signs of the rubbing of a human form as the murderer drew himself up and over. He escaped that way."

"Why should anybody kill the servant?"

"I am not infallible. I have a theory, however."

"And that?"

"Is, that Thomas was in the way. I believe that he was slain by the person who stole the jewels, and to remove him from the path of escape."

"Cooledge, do you think the jewels are gone from the house?" sharply cried the host.

"If not, where are they?"

"I don't know."

"Is there any possibility of a practical joke?"

"Certainly not."

"And you and Count Altamonte both believed you placed them in my guardianship?"

"Yes."

"Do you think so now?"

"No. They surely were not in the box when it was locked, though how they could have been abstracted I don't understand."

"I will remind you that we spent some time in looking at a picture on the wall. My

time was thus occupied and my attention diverted—I had not then been given charge of the jewels, or I should not have been looking at pictures. I now remember that when I was asked to look at the picture the casket was open. When I turned it was closed; somebody had shut the cover down. It seems only fair to infer that the thief took the jewels then and closed the cover so we would not miss the gems."

"Just heaven, Cooledge, this is awful!" exclaimed Lynnfield.

"And mysterious."

"Half a million gone, and the count will never recover from it. And the gems—why, they were so magnificent! They were—Ah! there comes the count."

Altamonte put in an appearance, looking worried and excited:

"*Mon Dieu!*" he cried, "why do you delay so? Where are the jewels? Do not tell me they are yet missing."

"We have been looking at the dead man—"

"Bah! what is a man now? Look for the gems! Monsieur Detective, that is what you were engaged for. What is it to us if a hundred men are dead? *Mon Dieu!* look for the jewels! Oh! miserable luck!—oh! sorrowful hour! Sirs, the jewels must be found. Why do you stand idle? Arouse! Bestir yourselves! Search in all places. Away and find the gems!"

The titled gentleman swung his arms wildly and almost danced in his mental distress, but Lynnfield did not rush to obey him. The master of the house did not know what to do. Certain facts pressed heavily upon him, and he was beginning to be dazed again, and by other things now.

Barrington Oakes appeared on the scene.

"Mr. Lynnfield," he spoke, seriously, "we all regret this unhappy affair, but allow me to say that your presence is needed elsewhere. The guests wait in the parlors. What is to be done? Is the wedding to go on? They do not know. They stand stupidly, not daring to leave lest they wound you, and very uncomfortable because they have to remain in inactivity. Would it not be well to let them know what to do?"

"Yes, yes. Where is my daughter?"

"In the small room off of the parlor."

"And Robert Houston?"

"Is there also."

"The ceremony shall go on."

"But the bride objects."

"She does? Why?"

"She believes that the tragedy which has opened the night is an event which should close it, and declines to go on with a ceremony thus baptized in blood."

"This is nonsense!"

"Her feelings are natural, sir, whether we think them sound or not. You had better see her yourself, and talk the matter over."

"I will."

Lynnfield took a step away and then paused and faced Cooledge again, slowly adding:

"I leave you to settle this matter. Do what you think is best in such a lamentable hour, but do not let anything stand in the way of activity. Solve this mystery if you can."

"Other officers will soon be here," replied Nathaniel. "Shall I leave them to look to the murder, and devote my own attention to the lost jewels?"

"Most surely. That is your part of the work; the others can see to the killing, but do you see to the robbery. Great heavens! what are we to do if those jewels are really gone?"

"Sorrowful night, sorrowful night!" moaned the count, wringing his hands.

"I accept the commission you have given me, and I'll do my best to recover the lost gems."

Lynnfield knit his brows darkly.

"It amazes me. Who among us could have been a thief? Not one of the servants was near but Cyrus, and he was not called until the casket was locked. He is proven innocent—though that was not needed; his honor is beyond question. No other servant was near. What does that point to, Cooledge?"

"A thief among your invited guests," bluntly answered the detective.

"Impossible!"

"Yet, it is the thought in your own mind."

"I can see no other explanation," admitted Lynnfield, knitting his brows the closer. "I invite the best and richest—but let it rest for now. Bestir yourself, Cooledge, and I will join you presently."

The speaker went to his daughter. She was now in her private room. She still wore the wedding garments, but she seemed to shrink within them like a condemned criminal rather than to stand in the pride of a happy bride. She caught sight of her father and cried out sharply:

"No, no; I will not have it so; I will not agree to letting the ceremony go on!"

"Vivian, be calm," Lynnfield urged. "You are not responsible for all this. Give it no heed. Proceed with the ceremony, and—"

"I will not, I will not! A man has been slain here, to-night. Will happiness attend any wedding solemnized when a dead man lies within our doors?—ay, dead and murdered!"

She covered her face with her hands and shivered pitifully.

Lynnfield saw her mood and made his decision. She was almost hysterical, and he saw it would be almost a crime to insist on his wishes.

"All shall be as you say, Vivian. Shall I dismiss the guests?"

"Yes."

"It shall be done."

Lynnfield turned to the ladies present, selected one who appeared to have the least of the all-pervading pallor and tremors of the party, bade her see carefully to his daughter, and then went out. He joined the guests. Many of them had already slipped quietly away, but others had remained through various reasons.

Lynnfield made a few remarks to them, and then all faded away as soon as possible, and the house was left to the family and the nearest friends.

Presently Lynnfield was joined by Nathaniel Cooledge.

"Are they all gone?" asked the detective.

"Yes."

"What did you say to the female reporter?"

"The reporter? Why, I had utterly forgotten her, and, now you mention her, I have not seen her for some time."

"Since when?"

"I cannot remember."

"She was in the room when the jewels were exhibited," reminded Cooledge, with slow and impressive utterance. "Why did she go so suddenly?"

"Perhaps to hurry to her paper with news of this affair."

"I have thought of that, but it seems to me she would have been more likely to linger. 'A man murdered!' might make a sensational headline, but the story of how he was slain would prove a better card. I ask you once more, why did Miss Adrienne Everley go so suddenly?"

"There is meaning in your tone. Explain!"

"Perhaps the female reporter can do that."

"Jupiter! do you suspect her of stealing the jewels?"

"I make no charges, but I am interested in her. Why did she go so abruptly? When did she go? Did she go with the jewels?"

CHAPTER IV.

STRANGE EVENTS 'LONGSHORE.

A REFRESHING breeze blew landward from the East River and made the summer evening cool and pleasant. Two persons who sat on a box on one of the piers were dimly conscious of the fact that they were especially favored, but they were too deep in discussion to give the wind much thought.

South street was to them an old stamping-ground, and the box no new resort. Their homes were near the river, and they knew it was the most comfortable locality in which to pass their period of rest from toil.

True, it was not as light as the favored regions of Broadway, but they were not

timid, and it was pleasant to look across the river and see the twinkling lights of Brooklyn, and to note the passage of the various water-craft.

This night one of them, while placid of temper in one way was unusually serious in others.

"Times is hard, Nibsy!" he sighed.

"So they be, Andy, but things will boom, later on."

"Who supplies the stuff ter eat while the boom is comin'?"

"I reckon you do, Andy."

"Ay, ay, lad, or else it don't come at all. Now, you are only eighteen years old, an' you ain't got w'ot I have. There's the wife and six childer at home, an' times is hard!"

"Brace up, old man; it'll all come around right."

"When, Nibsy?"

"Some good fairy may dump a bushel o' hard cash inter yer fist at any time."

"We look fer sech things at eighteen, but not at thirty-nine. Sudden wealth don't come ter many, Nibsy, an' w'ot little a feller does git in the way o' cash comes by hard labor. Mark that down, boy!"

"All right, Andy. You've got an older head than I have, an' I am willin' ter admit you're wiser fer it, but I will keep on lookin' fer a good fairy jest the same. I want somebody ter drop a million inter my fin. I should know w'ot ter do with it, Andy. See?"

"You won't git it, boy. Luck don't come ter nobody when times is hard. You see—"

"Listen!"

"What is it?"

"Git the cotton out o' yer ears, old man! Can't you hear that?"

"A horse runnin' full speed somewheres."

"Your telephone ain't wholly broke. Yes, it's a runnin' hoss, an' comin' this way."

"Let it come. We can't ride if it's out fer pleasure, an' ef it's a runaway we can't break our bones by stoppin' it."

"Dunno about that, old man."

Nibsy was interested, and he sprung down from the box and advanced a few steps. Then he saw the running horse come into view. Down a side-street it came with a rattle and bang, and then Nibsy grew excited.

"A runaway, an' a woman in it, by gum!"

He saw all this at one glance, and his admiration rose as he saw, further, that though the animal was speeding madly along, and wholly beyond control, the single occupant of the light carriage was holding to the reins with a firm grasp and keeping her place upright and steady.

"Andy Hicks, she's a corker!" shouted Nibsy. "Oh! see the daisy. I'll bet my head she's a Bowery gal!"

Nibsy had passed fourteen of his eighteen years near the famous thoroughfare he named, and he admired it and loved its people still; hence, the seemingly rash wager.

He had no more time to study the dauntless driver. The horse had reached South street fully, and had choice between going on and leaping into the stream or turning to one side. It turned, and the result was disastrous to all concerned.

The animal slipped; its feet shot out from under it; it fell heavily on the hard surface, and then Andy literally groaned aloud.

The female driver shot forward directly over the horse and went slipping along the street ahead of him, first alighting with what Andy deemed fatal force.

"Nibsy King, she's a dead woman!" he exclaimed.

The younger man did not wait to argue the point. His legs flashed under him and he dashed toward the scene of the accident. Before he reached it the horse partially struggled up, but fell back with an equine sound of pain.

Nibsy ignored the animal and ran to the woman. She lay motionless. He raised her in his arms, and the light from a neighboring lamp falling upon her face made him more zealous as a helper—he saw she was young and good-looking, and what man or youth is proof against the charms of that age?

"Is she dead?" asked Andy.

"Ef she's a Bowery gal she's only stunned; ef she's anybody else she is full dead. Help me pick her up, Andy. W'ot kin we do?"

"Carry her to Patsy Greene's shanty."

"Just the plan. Lift!"

Patsy Greene was a watchman on the piers, and he had a small hut at his disposal when he was favored with a resting place. Just then he was busy and away, but Andy and Nibsy were friends of his, and they knew they could use the shanty without remonstrance.

They lifted the woman and bore her to the structure, after which she was laid on a couch. It was a rude resting place, but quite sufficient for the purpose. This done, they stood idle and gazed at her.

"Say, she's a handsome one," remarked Andy.

"Muscular, too. See the bigness o' her arms an' so on. Yes, an' remember she give us both a good lift."

"Boy, do you mind the clothes she has on?"

"Elegant, ain't they?"

"Wal, ef you had the bill ter pay you would say so."

"Looks as ef she had jest come from a ball-room."

"So she does, lad."

"Whatever set her ter drivin' around town at this hour?"

"I'll be jiggered ef I know."

"D'ye s'pose she is dead?"

"Look an' see."

"I—wal, you see, Andy, I'm a kid an' you're a married man. I don't know how a dead woman acts, an' you do, maybe. You go ahead an' investigate. I'll back ye up, old man."

"I'm only a rough 'longshoreman, but mebber I kin tell, even ef such a clipper is out o' my line."

If Andy had been dealing with a woman of glass he would not have been more undecided and gingerly in his manner, but he made an examination after a fashion.

"Her pulse is gone an' her heart don't beat," he announced. "Yes, she is dead, sure as guns."

"I didn't think it. Et seemed ter me that when she shot out o' the carriage she hit the side o' the horse, first, an' then sorter slid along from there ter the pavement. That would break her fall—but you ought ter know."

"She's dead!"

The object of this announcement suddenly amazed them by sitting upright. She bent a steady glance upon Andy Hicks and firmly exclaimed:

"You are a chump!"

The 'longshoreman's jaw fell. It was not so much that an uncomplimentary term had been addressed to him, but he was not accustomed to seeing dead women act in this way.

Nibsy King grew excited.

"Bully!" he cried; "she's worth two corpses yet!"

"No fault of yours," retorted the young woman. "You're not fit to keep a morgue!"

"Hi!" cried Nibsy, "didn't I tell you she was a Bowery gal? The habit o' the breed shows out!"

The rescued woman seemed affronted at first, but her manner suddenly changed. She laughed, swung her feet from the couch and sat upright in a more natural position. Then she grew thoughtful.

"I am not a person of iron," she confessed.

"I guess I have been running without a grip on the cable. What has happened?"

"You got pitched out o' the wagon and nearly busted yer cokernut," distinctly replied Nibsy.

She started up.

"I was run away with," she exclaimed; "I remember now. Where is the horse? Where am I?"

"You are right here," practically responded Nibsy, "but the horse may be in Harlem or Hoboken now. We left him lyin' in the street."

"You chumps!" was the angry cry, "how dared you do that?"

"Miss, we couldn't lift the hoss," soberly replied Andy.

The simplicity of the reply appealed to the woman, and her own mind became suddenly clearer.

"Now that I think of it," she added, "I was about at the end of my journey when the brute fell. Let him go; he had no business to fall. So you stopped him, did you?"

"Yes'm," replied Nibsy, with unblushing readiness.

"You probably saved my life. I shall not forget to reward you for it. My life is of value to me just now. If I had a thousand dollars with me I would give it to you, but I lack the cash. I have something just as good, fortunately."

She plunged her hand into a pocket at the side of her dress. This did not impress her companions as anything very peculiar. Never having mixed with the upper crust of society, they did not know how unusual it was for a lady of that rank to have a dress-pocket, and especially one in such a fluffy, unsubstantial dress as this one which they set down as a ball costume.

She fumbled around for awhile, and then out came the hand. She straightened the fingers, and they caught the gleam of something extraordinary in their experience.

"Diamonds!" gasped Nibsy.

"Diamonds!" calmly agreed the lady.

There in her hand lay two rings, each a beauty in the full sense of the word. The watchman's lamp was not of the brightest, but it was enough so that little rays of light went, as it seemed, shooting out toward the men.

They stared open-eyed.

"Crickety! that beats the Maiden Lane stores!" added Nibsy enrap.

"Do you like them?"

"Why, they are giddy gushers!" declared the youth.

"Take them!"

She tossed a ring to each of them. Andy's fell to the floor, but Nibsy was not the person to miss anything. He seized his prize with the skill of an artist at such tricks.

The lady held up a warning finger.

"Don't you get gay on this lay-out," she added. "Don't get the notion into your heads that you have smetthing sham here, which you can use for napkin-rings. Those beauties are worth a cool five hundred apiece!"

Andy Hicks was a poor man, but he had an honest soul. He began to feel misgivings.

"Miss," he gently observed, "we don't care ter take these things. We don't need them: you keep them."

"Keep them? Why?"

"You kin wear them, an' we can't."

"Who said you were to wear them?" sharply asked the lady.

"Wal, you see— Confound ye! git out!"

The last words were addressed to Nibsy. The latter was not inclined to lose such a prize, and when he heard the 'longshoreman begin to speak as he did the boy pulled sharply at Andy's coat-tails. He believed his companion was doing violence to their rights, as he surely was to their pockets. He tried to convey this idea by pulling at Andy's coat, but the elder man was not to be changed from his purpose.

"Maybe you are rich?" sarcastically suggested the lady.

"No."

"Then why refuse?"

"Wal, you see—"

Andy hesitated, but Nibsy broke in curtly. "Hang it all! he thinks your trolley is twisted—thinks you're wrong up top, you see—crazy."

She broke into a rippling laugh.

"My good soul, dismiss such fears from your mind. I am perfectly sane—oh! am I not? Sane and sound as a Sheephead winner before the bugle sounds. Take the rings; I have plenty more. See here!"

Again the hand went into her pocket, and presently both her companions were mute. A pile of sparkling gems were before them—a wonderful collection. They were dazed by the sight of such riches.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS SCHOONER.

THE manner of the men, amazed as it was, amused the custodian of the jewels and she laughed merrily.

"How does that hit you?" she inquired, in her free-and-easy way.

"Et dazzles my lamps like it does ter look at the sun," confessed Nibsy King, brushing his hand across his eyes.

"Ever see anything to beat it?"

"Did I? Wal, the only sparkler I ever owned was a dinner-can when I worked two days on a job in the goat destrict," replied Nibsy, "an' that is all I know about diamonds except w'ot I've seen in the Maiden Lane winders."

"I could use these for marbles and never feel the poorer if I lost," declared the lady.

She thrust the rest of the jewels back into her pocket and then abruptly stepped out of the shanty. She swept a quick glance around.

"Your hoss is up on his trotters," said Nibsy, "but he bows every time he steps. He must have got a bad sprain."

"Never mind the horse; I do not care for him. I am at the end of my journey, and the beast deserves a cripple of the leg for getting gay and running away with me; let him go. Boys, I am going now."

"Where?" asked Andy.

"On my journey."

"Miss, this ain't the safest place fer nobody at this hour o' the night, an' certainly not fer you. Let us escort you ter a safer—"

"Old man, do you see yonder vessel?" asked the heroine of the night.

"Yes."

"That is the end of my journey. No evil spirit is likely to nab me while I am going that far. Watch me go on board. Yes, watch me, but let it be understood that our acquaintance ends there. We have met, you have done me a service; I have paid you well for it; I think you are blessed old chaps—I do like your style—but a short horse is soon curried and our acquaintance ends right here. Sorry, boys, but I can't keep up the intimacy."

"We wouldn't expect it from the likes o' you," Andy hastened to say, in all honesty.

"Don't think I'm trying to be swell, for I am no dude," assured this girl of eccentric speech; "but there are reasons, old man. We must part. Look your last on the Lady of the Diamonds!"

"Say," broke in Nibsy, "who in thunder be you, anyhow?"

"I have named the name—I am the Lady of the Diamonds!" and she laughed merrily.

"You have another name, I reckon."

"Maybe yes; maybe no. If I have, it isn't kept for the public. Here we part. Look your last on me!"

She dropped an airy courtesy, and seemed to enjoy the blank wonder on their faces—for the wonder was there; she was a new sort of the creature in their experience.

"If you're all right, miss, we won't say you no," returned Andy.

"I am all right, and it wouldn't do you any good to say me no, if you should do it. The Lady of the Diamonds rules, not obeys."

"Yes, miss," humbly agreed Andy.

"Well, boys, good-by!"

She gave each her hand in turn, and then, once more saying a word of farewell, turned and tripped down the pier. They stood in utter silence until they saw her board a vessel and disappear in the gloom of the deck. Then Nibsy found his voice.

"Wal, I'll be jiggered!"

"Nibsy, this is amazin'!" muttered the 'longshoreman.

"It is so."

"Be we really awake?"

The youth held up the glittering diamond she had given him.

"Andy, I reckon we are plum' awake, an' here's the proof of it."

"W'ot do you make o' her?"

"I don't make," tersely responded Nibsy.

"I never seen no other woman like her."

"Ditto!"

"She was dressed like a queen. She must be one o' them Murray Hill folks—a reg'lar nabob."

"Don't you think et, Andy. She was ragged out stunnin' fine, but did you notice her way o' talkin'? She spun slang like a Bowery gal, an' that tells the tale. She ain't no more a nabob than we be, old man, but, thunder! didn't she have the sparklers!"

"Nibsy, this is an awful pile o' money fer us ter have," suggested the 'longshoreman, looking at his diamond.

"It is a rich an' juicy haul, fer sure, an' we ought ter do something ter celebrate et. W'ot shall et be?"

"Le's go an' have something ter eat. You know my gal Margery works in a restaurant, an' we can drop in an' feed up."

"So we can, Andy. Heave ahead, an' we will stuff our stomachs until we can play checkers on them."

Gloating on their rich prospects they set out, but Nibsy was not yet done.

"Say, old man," he pursued, "we want somethin' special—somethin' that will raise wool on our teeth. See?"

"Yes."

"We won't never strike this snap no more, an' we can't let the chance slip. We'll eat the best, an' enough of it ter give us the worst case o' dyspepsia this ward ever seen. Ketch on?"

"I do, an' I am with ye, lad," heartily replied the 'longshoreman.

It was not far to the restaurant, and as the place was an all-night stand, it was in full blast. They went in, and were promptly spied by Andy's daughter, who came to wait on them. Margery, among her associates, was considered a very handsome girl, and she did not lack much of it. She had a good face and figure, and an air of wholesomeness which went a long ways.

Greetings took place, and then Nibsy impatiently asked:

"W'ot is it, old man?"

"Fish-balls," answered Andy, brightening. Nibsy's face fell.

"Fish-balls!" he echoed.

"Yes; they keep 'em."

"Is that w'ot you call a swell feed?"

"I like fish-balls."

"So do I, when I'm on the usual lay, but this ain't no fish-ball spread—not ef the court knows her grandfather. Margery, bring us two Welch rarebits."

"Wha—what's that?" exclaimed Andy. "I never eat none o' them, nor no other kind o' rabbits."

"Me, too, but the swells eat them, an' that's enough fer us. Miss Hicks, two Welch rarebits."

"We don't make them," replied Margery, smiling.

"Huh! that's great. Wal, make et quail on toast."

"There never was a quail in this restaurant, I am sure."

"Say, w'ot fer a hash-house is this, anyhow?" asked the disgusted patron. "Got any—any— Wal, hang et! bring me some fish-balls, too. Darn et all, I wish we had gone to Del's. Shall we go now?"

"Fish-balls is great eatin', Nibsy," hesitatingly reminded the 'longshoreman.

"So they be, so they be. Margery, bring us two sets, an' hev 'em a delikit brown. Hoop-la, Andy, we'll eat until we can't sneeze, we're so full."

The youth was restored to good humor, and it was permanent. He and Andy were duly served, and they eat well and long. When their capacity was reached they paid their bill and left.

"Where now?" asked the 'longshoreman.

"Say, old man, let's go back an' see more o' that schooner. I am growin' more curious about that gal. She's young—not over twenty-five, I take et; an' et seems mighty queer ter me she should be amblin' around town alone at this hour. Le's go an' see w'ot fer a looker the schooner is, an' all we kin besides."

Andy was not less interested, and they walked back toward the dock where they had seen the craft. Their conversation was of the diamonds they carried in their pockets, and they were filled with consuming curiosity to know what kind of a person it was who could afford to cast precious jewels to the winds thus.

They agreed that she must just have come from a ball, basing their judgment on the dress she wore; but further than that they were at a loss.

"Say, Nibsy," suddenly suggested Andy, "maybe we had better keep out o' her sight. W'ot ef she should change her mind an' want the sparklers back?"

"Correct, old man. We will keep shady, fer we have earned the pay she give us, an'—Hullo!"

"W'ot?"

"We've gone wrong."

"No, we ain't; this is the right place. See! There is Patsy's shanty where we took her in."

"Then where in thunder is the schooner?"

The 'longshoreman looked along the river-front.

"The—the schooner?"

"Yes. Where is it?"

"Why, I don't see it."

"Me, too. Say, she's gone; she is!"

Andy rubbed his eyes, but it did no good. They were in front of the dock where the craft had been, but no dark shape greeted their vision. It was hard to believe, and they were not over their wonder when their friend the watchman appeared on the scene. They hastened to question him.

"The schooner has jest sailed," replied the watchman.

"Then she did some tall hustlin', by gum!"

"It didn't take them long. All was dark there until a while ago, an' then they got a move on all of a sudden, an' off they went. I guess they will be back, though."

"Why?"

"The Tripping Mary—that's the name o' the schooner—was here ter take a cargo o' somethin' or other to Charleston, South Car'lina, an' she ain't got it aboard yet."

Nibsy King plunged his hands down deep into his pockets.

"No, an' she never will get it aboard!" he declared.

"How do you know?"

"My trolley ain't so bu'sted but it will run on the wire and shoot off sparks when it crosses a kink. My grip on the cable is pooty fair, an' the car is still runnin'."

"What do you mean?"

Nibsy had assumed the air of a philosopher, but he was not disposed to confide in the watchman. He questioned Patsy somewhat further, and then took Andy to one side.

"Old man," he observed, with energy, "we hev struck a crook."

"How's that, Nibsy?"

"Why did that schooner get a walk on so soon after the Lady with the Diamonds come along? There is meat in this nut. Kin we crack it? This is a mystery, sure. Is there a crime lack of it?"

CHAPTER VI.

VIVIAN'S THIRD VISITOR.

It was the morning after the deferred wedding at Walton Lynnfield's mansion. The guests were no longer there, and Nathaniel Cooledge was equally conspicuous by his absence. In place of the bustle and gayety of the previous day an air of subdued melancholy hung over everything and everybody as if the bride, that was to have been, was a corpse, instead. People spoke with subdued voices, and the strongest-nerved of the household was upset mentally and physically.

The body of Thomas Smith had been removed to an undertaker's shop, but his death rested heavily on the other servants.

The tragedy was felt keenly by the higher class in the house, but it was noticeable that they spoke more of the lost diamonds than of the murder.

In the parlor was gathered a group composed of Mr. Lynnfield, the Count Altamonte and Barrington Oakes, and they were looking at all phases of the case as they understood the matter.

A discussion, at which Robert Houston, the disappointed groom of the previous night, had been present, had resulted in the decision that the wedding should not long be deferred. If the diamonds were recovered speedily they could be used as intended, but if the robber evaded detection for any length of time the wedding was to go on without them.

Houston had gone to Vivian Lynnfield to make known the decision, and his return was awaited now.

"Robert seems long away," finally remarked Lynnfield, breaking in on another remark.

"He will come directly," answered the count.

"He has Miss Vivian to console," added Barrington Oakes. "Nobody else can reassure her as he can. He does right to stay and calm her all he can. We men try to be

practical about this, but with a lady—ah! they have not our firm, coarse nerves!"

"She will calm down in time," assured Altamonte.

"The recovery of the jewels will do much in that line."

"It will not bring Thomas back to life!" sighed Lynnfield.

"Ah! he was only a servant," reminded Altamonte, meaning no harm by the remark.

"He was a human being, and the shadow of murder is not a pleasant thing to have over one's wedding."

"The shadow will be wiped out when the criminal is dead, too," declared Oakes. "Have no fear on this point, Lynnfield; the guilty person will be found and given over to law."

"I hope so."

"I know it! Why, if need be we will all turn detectives. He must be caught; he shall be!"

Lynnfield brightened a little. The speech did him good. He looked at Barrington Oakes almost gratefully. The assertion was a cool, resolute, encouraging declaration. It pleased the host, and made him feel that he had an ally such as was needed in the campaign.

Barrington Oakes was impressive of appearance. He was tall and strongly-built, and he had a face full of power and determination. He was, one would say, a man of emergencies—a man born to lead, and lead to win. Noting all these peculiarities in the resolute face before him, Lynnfield thought:

"I am lucky to have such an aid. He will never let Nathaniel Cooledge falter, if the detective weakens under disappointment. Oakes never would weaken."

"Do you think," asked the count, "that the thief was the young person from the newspaper office who came here to report the wedding?"

"No!" declared Lynnfield.

"Why not?"

"She never could have done it. She had not the face of a thief. Besides, would that great newspaper have sent a thief here? Hardly!"

The count hesitated; then shrugged his shoulders.

"Monsieur Oakes, what do you think?"

Barrington looked straight at the wall.

"I am not so situated as to express an opinion. As far as Mr. Lynnfield's last question is concerned, it has little weight. Many of the crimes of the day are committed by persons who yield to temptation which comes suddenly. It may have been so in this case. Mind, gentlemen, I do not say the female reporter is guilty. I should be rash and unjust to give an opinion when I know so little. I bid you wait for the detective's coming. He will soon be here; he will have a report to make. Let us wait his coming."

"That is well said. Let us pre-judge nobody—Ah! here is our friend Robert."

Young Houston entered the room.

"What!" cried the count, trying to be gay, "you do not look like a happy groom!"

Houston threw himself heavily into a chair.

"I do not feel like one!" he exclaimed, curtly.

Lynnfield and the count exhibited wonder, but Barrington Oakes was impassive and calm.

"Is Miss Vivian prostrated by this horrible affair?" asked Altamonte.

Houston sprung to his feet.

"In brief," he added, sharply, "Vivian refuses to marry me!"

"She prefers delay, does she?"

"I should say she does—to the end of the world!"

"How is that?"

"When I say she refuses to marry me I do not mean for to-day, or to-morrow, or the next year. She declines to marry me at all; the engagement is off!"

The lover began to tear around the room like a wild animal, while his companions watched him. The watch of Oakes was composed, but the other men were dumfounded.

"*Mon Dieu!*" finally gasped the count.

"I don't understand," murmured Lynnfield.

"Nor I. If you can get light from Vivian I wish you would do it; I can get none. She

declines to marry me, and that is all I can get out of her. She has declared the engagement off: I know no more. She gives no valid reason."

"Monsieur Lynnfield," cried Altamonte, "go at once to your daughter. She is hysterical."

"She is perfectly calm," declared Houston.

"And will give no reason for her course?"

"Oh! she talks of the murder, and says it is a sign that we are not intended for each other, and that a curse will be over our lives if we marry—and a lot more of intangible things of that sort. She had words enough, but not one to the point."

"Oh! these women!" cried the count, raising both hands on high. "Willful, erratic, delicious, sublime, entrancing—yet fickle as the winds of the cerulean sky!"

"My daughter is not willful or fickle!" asserted Vivian's father, with some warmth.

"Then go to her and get her reason."

"I will."

Mr. Lynnfield leaped to his feet and stalked out of the room. The disappointed lover threw himself into a chair and buried his face in his hands. The count tugged fiercely at his mustache and turned to Barrington Oakes—cool, unmoved Mr. Oakes.

"Desperation!" exclaimed the titled gentleman; "desperation!"

Oakes looked at him composedly.

"What will come next?" lamented the count. "Here our young lady was madly in love with Robert—she told me, herself, that he was the king of men—and now she won't listen to reason. *Mon Dieu!* I shall commit suicide if there be a bit more of all this!"

"Be at ease," advised Oakes. "All this will come right in time. We must not expect everything to nod and smile at our bidding. A woman has nerves. Give Miss Lynnfield time to recover from the terrible shock of last night. Do not accuse her of fickleness; let her recover, and it may be different. Judge her, not by her hour of distress, but as she will be when she calms herself."

"Nobly said, sir; nobly said! Your sentiments are an honor to you, and I feel that I own an apology to all here for my own hasty words. I am all upset, or I would not utter a remark derogatory to the noblest half of humanity, divine woman!"

The count bowed low as he gave these sentiments breath, but he was not helped out. Barrington Oakes remained as stolid as ever, and Houston did not come out of his collapsed state.

Minutes passed, and Oakes finally rose and asked to be excused for a short time. He went up-stairs. As he passed by the door of Vivian's room he heard voices within. He paused for a moment, caught the inflection of the voices and then went on to his own apartment.

There he tarried until he heard Lynnfield go down. This done he promptly left his own room, went to Vivian's door and knocked.

"Come!" he heard in her voice.

He opened the door and entered. She was there, her face tear-stained and her manner that of extreme dejection. Seeing Oakes she rose quickly, a new expression coming to her face. He was close to her and he caught her arm savagely, his usually calm countenance lighting up with what seemed to be hot anger.

"You fool!" he exclaimed, "what have you done?"

She tried feebly to release her arm, but he held fast.

"Come, speak out! I say," he added, "what have you done? Can't you be satisfied with the mischief already afloat? Answer me!"

Vivian trembled before the imperious speaker. Her eyes were still wet with tears, but she forgot all but what seemed to be great fear of her companion. Well might she fear him if he was an enemy, for he was as striking in his angry mood as when at ease. His powerful eyes gleamed tigerishly, and she shivered painfully.

"What have I done to displease you?" she feebly inquired.

"Didn't I tell you not to precipitate another crisis?"

"Yes."

"Then why have you done it?"

"I—I didn't know that I had."

"No?" he sneered. "What do you call it to assert that you will not marry Houston?"

"But I cannot marry him after—"

"Need you have told him so?"

"It might as well have come now as any time."

"Wrong! You should have avoided everything now that would make them wonder."

"I—I didn't know, and I was so unhappy! I love Robert, and we are parted forever! It is breaking my heart!"

"Nonsense! Use a little common sense. People soon recover from all kinds of disappointments. Have you told your father you will not marry Houston?"

"Yes."

"When you talk with him again, ascribe it to nervousness; don't let the truth leak out. I can delay here no longer, but let me add that if you make a row over this it will go hard with you. Use common-sense or I will make you suffer. Bear this in mind."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FEMALE REPORTER.

NATHANIEL COOLEDGE stood in front of the City Hall. His expression was one of uncertainty, and it did not belie the state of his mind. He had just come from the office of one of the city newspapers, and the result of his call there puzzled him.

He had heard that Adrienne Everley was employed on the paper in question, but it had been denied that she had been sent to report the Lynnfield wedding; or sent there in any capacity. More, it was denied that the Lynnfield family ever had made application for a reporter to attend the wedding.

The denial of the first supposed fact had surprised the detective, but the last denial had done more. He had been distinctly told that the family had requested the paper to send a representative, and since one had come, how could his latest information be true?

The paper had printed no notice of the affair in the morning issue, and it was said that no account had been handed in. More, Miss Adrienne Everley had had no assignment for the previous evening, and her whereabouts for that period of time was unknown to the management.

This was the situation as Nathaniel stood in City Hall Park. He had paused to meditate and the result was soon seen.

"I will visit the lady herself—if I can find her," he decided.

Her address had been furnished at the office, and he took a car and started for the point named.

"I cannot well believe that I have been lied to in the office," he mused, "and the only other way out of all this is to suppose that there has been a deep plot of some sort. It never does to judge harshly, but it looks as if Miss Adrienne Everley will be conspicuous by her absence when I get to the house which she has honored with her presence."

He reached the house in due time; he rung the bell; a servant answered the summons.

"Is Miss Everley in?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir," was the reply.

"I would like to see her."

"Is it professional business?"

"Yes."

"You can go right up, sir. Third floor, front."

"Thank you."

Nathaniel went. He found the door; he knocked; a voice bade him enter.

He was face to face with Miss Everley! She was seated at a desk, but she rose with the polite attention of a business woman. He bowed, and she returned the greeting with a slight inclination of her head. She was calm, but gave no sign of recognition.

"You do not seem to recognize me," he remarked.

"I cannot say that I do, sir," she answered.

"It was last night."

"Last night?"

"Yes. At Lynnfield's."

"I do not understand."

"I saw you at the wedding, last night."

She smiled slightly.

"There seems to be some mistake. I sometimes attend weddings, but I did not attend any last night. More, I do not remem-

ber having had the pleasure of meeting you anywhere before, and I certainly never heard of Lynnfield's, whatever that may be."

A novice might have been amazed and confused by the coolness and naturalness of this denial, but Nathaniel had dealt with all kinds of criminals. He saw no more in this than the denial of a person of nerve who hoped to carry out a bold game.

"Your name is Miss Everley?" he questioned.

"Yes, sir."

"And you are a reporter on a down-town newspaper?"

"Yes."

"You say you never heard of Lynnfield. Did you ever hear of the Count Altamonte? Or of certain valuable diamonds given to Miss Vivian Lynnfield as a wedding present, and exhibited before the ceremony in a private room of the house, and admired by all there?"

"I know nothing of what you are talking about," she quietly replied. "I have seen wedding gifts exhibited—diamonds, as well as other things—but I never heard of Miss Vivian or of the Count Altamonte. In brief, all this is Greek to me. What do you mean?"

Nathaniel leaned forward in his seat.

"Is this the line you intend to adopt?"

"Sir?" she questioned, some resentment in her tone.

"I will not seek to beat about the bush. I am one of those who were at Lynnfield's, last night, and I saw you there. You posed as a reporter for the paper you really represent, yet you had no assignment from the office. Who sent you? Why were you there? Why did you come, and why did you leave so suddenly?"

Miss Everley was a strong, healthy young woman, but her face was not noticeable for color. Now, however, it reddened, and not with pleasure. Clearly, she was angry. By an effort, or the imitation of an effort, she recovered her composure.

"Sir," she replied, "I was not out of this room from six o'clock last night until eight this morning."

"You were not at the Everley wedding?"

"I was not!"

"Do you know that I can prove by a score of people that you were there?"

"If you seek to prove it, you will attempt what is utterly false!" was the spirited retort. "Now that this has gone so far, let me do my share of the questioning. Who are you that comes here with such a remarkable story and assertion?"

"I am a detective."

"Ah!"

She drew a sudden breath. The news, if such it was, seemed to fall with considerable force, yet she did not waver. Her eyes still met his steadily.

She surveyed him for awhile and then added:

"If you are what you claim, you had an object in coming here. Allow me to inquire what it was."

"Was it before or after you left Lynnfield's that Thomas Smith was murdered?" swiftly asked the detective.

A slight hesitation, and then she answered with the same unwavering coolness.

"If you are to do all the leading you may as well do all the explaining also. I have told you that I was not at the house of this mysterious Lynnfield, and not out of my room last night. I decline to act as a jumping-jack for your aims, whatever they may be. If you want to explain yourself you may; otherwise, you may take your leave and let me attend to my business. I have no time to devote to trifling things or persons."

Coolidge lost no part of this reply.

"A woman of admirable nerve!" he thought.

He bowed quietly.

"I will try to be explicit," he replied, aloud. "A man was murdered at Lynnfield's, last night, and certain jewels were stolen. That is what brought me here. I came to see if you could help me—but you say you were not there."

"I was not!"

"I saw you there."

"Pardon me; you did nothing of the sort. I was not out of my room—"

"Can you prove that?"

"Probably not; I was all alone here."

"We claim you were at the wedding, and your persistent denial looks bad for you."

The reporter's eyes glittered suddenly.

"We begin to understand each other, I think," she returned. "You wish to accuse me—"

"I wish you to clear yourself."

"You are unduly worried about me then!"

Miss Everley, retorted. "It will be well for you to confine yourself to affairs purely professional, and not let this yearning for me to clear myself sap the fountains of your sympathy."

The sarcasm of the reply was not lost upon Coolidge. He flushed a little with anger, and then answered:

"An innocent person is usually willing to aid an officer in getting light. You refuse that aid. What am I to think? Do you wish to precipitate a conflict with the powers of law?"

"I wish to be believed when I tell the truth. I say I was not out of my room last night after dark. When you deny my veracity you precipitate the conflict yourself, and if my way does not suit you, you have only yourself to blame. You are too head-long, sir."

"You wish me to admit that I did not see you at Lynnfield's?"

"No."

"What then?"

"I desire you to believe me when I say I was not there, or else leave me alone. I am too busy to waste my time on matters of trivial nature."

Nathaniel bowed. He saw that he was making no progress. She was not intemperate, but she was plain and decided. He would gain nothing by talking with her further. He rose.

"Possibly you will look at this in a different light, anon," he remarked.

"Possibly!"

With this terse reply she turned to her desk and began to write with all the calmness imaginable.

For a few seconds Nathaniel watched the white hand move along the paper without the least tremor, and then, without further comment, he turned and went out of the room.

"A woman of remarkable nerve!" he admitted, mentally. "Is her composure due to innocence, or to the audacity of unrepentant guilt?"

He could not answer the question; he was not able to fathom the female reporter.

Long experience had given him the ability to judge judicially on many points, and he was now compelled to admit that he had asserted more in her presence than he could absolutely prove. He had declared that he had seen her at Lynnfield's the previous evening. He believed he had, but, really, he could not swear to it.

In the whirl of events, the night before, he had bestowed only a casual glance on the reporter. He was confident that he now saw the person again, but he could not take his oath to it.

"I will have Lynnfield see her," he thought. "He can tell beyond question, and we will then see what the outspoken young woman will say. If she has stolen the jewels it is odd that she remains to face us all, but she probably thinks her tracks covered up. We will see."

Just then, as he reached the street, he met a man no stranger to him. It was a fellow detective.

Greetings were exchanged, and then the other man's manner of being at home there impressed Coolidge.

"Do you live in this section?" he asked.

"In the very house you have just left."

"Indeed! Do you know the other people here? If so, I want to speak with you. You know them all? Good! Listen to me!"

CHAPTER VIII.

DAD BUNKER'S GIRL.

COOLIDGE had met somebody he could question freely, and when the second detective had asserted his willingness to talk, the questioning began.

"Do you know Miss Adrienne Everley?" inquired Nathaniel.

"Quite well."

"Not an intimate friend?"

"Yes and no. My wife and she are chummy, and I have known of her for years. I have no time to be chummy with anybody, but I see her frequently."

"What is she?"

"A female reporter—a fashion writer, or something of that sort."

"A model woman?"

"I think I may say yes. I know of nothing to the contrary."

"You say you have known her long—"

"Ever since she used to play on the piers as a child."

"Did she do that?"

"Rather! Her father, who was familiarly known as Dad Bunker, was a 'longshoreman' in South street, and a character. If she ever had a mother—we will assume she did have one—I think she died young. I never saw the mother or heard of her. Dad Bunker was an illiterate man, and used to be like all other 'longshoremen'; no better, no worse. One day he carelessly allowed a bale of something to fall on him, and he died."

"And the daughter?"

"Was able to care for herself. She was a mighty precocious child, and she was the pet of all the 'longshoremen' when she was small. She frequented the piers a good deal, as I said before, and her ready tongue and sharp wit amused the rough fellows of the trade."

"But later?"

"I know little of her after she was thirteen or so. I do know she was nearly woman grown when Dad Bunker died, and that he left her penniless. The result was that she had to shift for herself. You have seen how well she did it—she makes money now as a reporter. Where she got her education I don't know, but she has it. More, she is open to hearty admiration for her grit and her true womanliness!" declared the narrator, warming to his subject.

"You call her father Dad Bunker—"

"Her own name is Bunker—at least, I suppose it is. 'Ad Bunker' was the name she was known by in her childhood."

"Did she marry to get the 'Everley'?"

"No. I suppose she assumed the name for business reasons. I am not a fastidious man, but Everley sounds better to me than 'Bunker.'"

"You say you lost sight of her for a good many years?"

"Yes."

"Then who can tell me of her life during that time?"

"I presume some of Dad Bunker's old associates could."

"Where can I find them?"

The second detective hesitated.

"There was a man named Andy Hicks," he finally answered, "who was intimate with Dad Bunker. I know of nobody better suited for the purpose of history than Andy."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know, but a stroll along the lower end of South street, with inquiry for him among the 'longshoremen', will develop him, sure. But, why is all this, Coolidge? Is Miss Everley under suspicion?"

"I know of nothing against her, but I wish to learn of her history. She seems to be a well-meaning woman. I know of nothing to the contrary. Kindly keep it dark that I want to know of her."

"I will."

Nathaniel went his way. He had decided to investigate among the 'longshoremen' of South street, but his first duty lay at Lynnfield's. He went at once to the residence.

He found the people there awaiting his return anxiously. They had nothing to report, but all looked to him for news. He told what he knew quietly and briefly, omitting only the little he had learned of Miss Everley's history.

He aroused wonder and uncertainty, but the count finally arrived at a decision.

"The reporter stole the jewels," he declared.

"It seems impossible," murmured Lynnfield.

"Remember that we had her here, yet the newspaper managers repudiate the whole thing. Why did she come anonymously, as I may put it, unless it was to steal the jewels?"

"Considering the fact that she remains quietly at her post it would be the last thing she would naturally do to come under unnatural circumstances," remarked Cooledge. "If she had intended to run away she might play the trick of coming irregularly. If, however, she intended to stick to her post, she would naturally see that a regular assignment from the office was necessary to ward off suspicion."

"That's a fact," agreed Lynnfield.

"Still," persisted the count, "I think she was the guilty one."

"Mr. Oakes, what is your opinion?" inquired Lynnfield.

"I agree with Mr. Cooledge," responded Barrington. "It does not seem that a prospective thief would come irregularly."

"Again," added the detective, "do you think it was a woman's hand that struck down the servant?"

"The officers from the station do say that the fatal knife was driven with more than a woman's strength."

"Women often surprise us with their strength," the count reminded, "and our reporter was muscular for her sex."

"I have been waiting," pursued Cooledge, "for you to mention one point upon which I desire light. I have understood you to say that you made a request for a reporter to write up this wedding of yours, Mr. Lynnfield."

"So I did."

"Then two facts seem peculiar. It is asserted at the newspaper office that no such request was made to them, yet the reporter came. How is that?"

Lynnfield turned his gaze upon the count.

"You had charge of that, Altamonte."

"Bah! I had forgotten this, in the rush of events. Monsieur Lynnfield, your good friend, Colonel Curtiss, told me of this Miss Everley as one who had officiated at the wedding of his daughter, a few weeks ago, and I selected her at his suggestion. To make sure of getting her I wrote her a personal letter, and directed it to her private address, as given to me by the colonel. That explains why the newspaper people had no record of the request."

"And seems to be against Miss Everley," admitted Lynnfield.

"Did you mail the letter yourself, count?" pursued Cooledge.

Altamonte meditated.

"I think I gave it to my friend, Mr. John Berwick to post."

"Who is he?"

"A gentleman who was here last night."

"Where is he now?"

"I have not seen him to-day."

"I will see him later. I wish to know if that letter was duly posted."

"It was; you can rely upon Berwick."

"Well, gentlemen, what do the station officers make of the case?"

"No more than you did, Cooledge."

"Do they agree with me?"

"Generally, yes."

"Explain."

"They think the thief escaped by the rear yard, and, meeting the servant, killed him to make good the escape. Further, it seems that the thief mounted the fence and passed to another yard. From there it would be easy to reach the street."

"Cooledge pointed out all of this at the time," interrupted Oakes.

"One thing I did not say," added the detective. "If we assume that our thief and murderer was a woman decked out in an elaborate gown we must give her credit for unusual acrobatic skill to vault fences in such a free-and-easy way."

"A severe set-back to the female reporter suspicion," observed Barrington Oakes, in his logical manner.

Silence followed the remark. There was, it seemed, no intention on the part of anybody to accuse Miss Everley in headlong style, and without regard to reason. Now, nobody wanted to take the position that a woman in a long dress could vault fences with ease.

It had been a temporary bomb-shell, and interest was taken out of the discussion. Conversation continued for some time longer, but without decided gains in any way.

Cooledge spent considerable time in the house. He calculated the chances and possibilities carefully. Little came of it, and,

when he went away, the mystery was as deep as ever.

Next he went to the police station. The officers there had interviewed neighbors to see if a fugitive had been noticed passing along the yards. None had been seen. The cabmen of a large area had been questioned, but without result.

It seemed that the murderer had gone unseen, though an officer is never ready to give up hope in such a line. Cooledge, for one, did not despair of finding somebody who had seen the fugitive.

He did not forget that he was to look into the life of Adrienne Everley, but it was evening before he found time to go to South street. Then he took his way in that direction.

He did not hope to find the man wanted in a style so easy as his fellow-detective had anticipated, but he went about the work. Reaching South street he found two persons standing by a building and engaged in conversation. One was young; the other was a short, solid old fellow who was giving loving attention to a disreputable-looking pipe. Cooledge paused in front of them.

"My man," he began, "can you tell me where I can find a 'longshoreman named Andy Hicks?"

The smoker took out his pipe and looked from the questioner to the youth.

"Kin you tell the gent where Andy is?" he asked.

The youth scratched his chin reflectively.

"Andy Hicks?" he muttered. "Wot fer a looker is he? Cross-eyed, with a wart on his nose?"

"I never have seen him myself," answered Nathaniel.

"I reckon I know him. He's a feller who has dirt enough on him ter build an island as big as the Brooklyn Bridge, an' his face is all red and pimply with rum. Ain't that him?"

The pipe-smoker hit the youth a blow in the ribs.

"Say, you let up, will ye?" he cried.

"Want me ter walk all over ye? I'll smash ye in the jaw, I will!"

It was an ominous threat and the speaker was irritated, but it was plain he was not very angry. He was smiling in the midst of his threats, and the youth broke into a ringing laugh.

"That's one on you, old man!" he declared merrily.

Nathaniel had lost nothing of all this.

"Am I to understand—"

"You're ter understand that the rum-drinker is right here!" replied the younger stranger.

"Yes," retorted his companion, "an' that there will be a funeral ter Nibsy King soon, ef he don't go light. Boss, I am Andy Hicks. Wot kin I do fer you?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERY OF THE DOCKS.

NATHANIEL understood the horse-play fully, and he laughed with his companions.

"The joke is on me worse than anybody else, for I did not suspect I was addressing the very man I wanted. I pay for my jokes when they hit me straight. Gentlemen, allow me to offer you the proof of it."

He handed over a couple of cigars, and they were seized with avidity. He who had been called Nibsy King chuckled in high spirits.

"Say, Andy, old stuff," he exclaimed, "the river runs all one way, an' luck comes in a rush when the tide gets ter settin' our way. We don't see no Lady o' Diamonds now, but cigars ain't no small stuff."

"Maybe this gent will vanish like she did."

"Boss, you ain't go no vessel near ter skip on, hev ye?" asked Andy anxiously.

"Not a bit of it."

"Good! I like ter hev a Samaritan stay right with me."

"My friend, do you want to make five dollars?"

"Bet yer life!" declared Mr. Hicks with alacrity.

"Are you a 'longshoreman?"

"I was yesterday."

With this enigmatical reply Andy winked to Nibsy, and the latter, doubling up cur-

ously, laughed so uproariously that a ragged woman who was about to pass concluded that the safest way was to make a detour to the other side of the street.

"I want to get tidings of another 'longshoreman. His name was Dad Bunker—"

Andy pointed upward.

"Inquire up there!" he replied, suddenly sobering down.

"Mr. Bunker is dead, eh?"

"Dad is dead. Poor Dad!"

"I was told that he was deceased. What family did he have?"

"Had a wife twenty odd year ago. She died. That left him only his daughter, Ad."

"Where is she?"

"Dunno, by mighty!"

"She was brought up along the river-front?"

"Wal, I sh'uld say she was!"

"And you knew her?"

"Knew her? Do I know the way ter my mouth? Knew her? Wal, I should say yes! Knew her fer years, stranger. Many's the day I hev been handlin' the hook when she come down on the piers ter see old Dad. Say, she was the keenest kid we had in our gang. The boys was pretty swift o' tongue, themselves, but nary one could measure wits with Ad an' come out best. Quick witted? Why, Lord love ye, she was jest a corker, Ad was."

"You all loved her, I take it."

"Wa-a-al, ye-es," hesitated Andy. "We sorter did so. But we liked her fer her sharp ways, fer she was sassy as you please."

"A perverse child, eh?"

"Yes, but not tough. Not tough, stranger; oh! Lord no! She was jest keen-witted, and a product o' the soil she lived on. In our rank of life sharp sayin's make the man or the woman, or the kid. She learned our ways. They wasn't her ways, fer her I do believe and her mother was of a different rank."

"Dad brought her up, did he?"

"No; she grew!"

"I see. Well, she grew up, then. What next?"

"Dad died, an' he left her without a cent. Then she took the game o' life up and set out ter make her own livin'."

"How?"

"Darned ef I know, boss, but when she used ter show up among us she was ragged out tremendous, an' as little like the old Ad Bunker as you please. She was a fine lady."

"Proud?"

"Proud? Not much, yer honor! See there!" and Andy clapped his hand to his bronzed cheek. "She kissed me there, she did; an' when she had all her fine duds on, Thunder! but she was a good one, an' smart—why, stranger, she knew more than you an' me put together."

"No doubt," replied Nathaniel, smiling. "But the fine clothes—how did she get them?"

"I asked her, an she wouldn't tell me."

"Ah!"

"But she got them honest; she did that! You're not ter think otherwise—say, boss, no doubts on Ad, now!" emphatically exclaimed the 'longshoreman.

"I had no intention of expressing any," diplomatically returned the detective. "You say you have not seen her lately."

"Not for two years."

"Where do you suppose she has been in the meanwhile?"

"Haven't any idea."

"Do you know of anybody who could tell me?"

"No. That is, unless Old 'Lizy Brown could do it. She kept house fer Dad Bunker, an' ef she's alive, it may be she knows where Ad is."

"Where does 'Lizy live?"

"She did hang out on Pearl street, an' I reckon she may be there now, ef she's alive. You might try. Did ye know Dad?"

"Not very well. I knew more of him than through direct acquaintance."

"Wal, ef you've got good news fer Ad, I hope you will find her."

Andy had been studying Nathaniel closely, and he suddenly broke forth in a new line:

"Say, you look like a man who has seen life in the upper circles. Do you know anything about diamonds?"

"Ahem!" warningly put in Nibsy King. Nathaniel had grown interested. "I have seen a good deal of them," he answered.

"Kin you tell a genooine?"

"Yes."

"I'd like fer you ter cast yer glims onter this an' see w'ot et's good fer."

The 'longshoreman pulled a ring from his pocket and handed it to his new acquaintance.

"I don't know whether et's good or not, an' mebbe you kin tell," he added.

"Why, man, this is a very remarkable diamond!" exclaimed Nathaniel.

"Ginooine, is et?"

"Yes, and probably worth five hundred dollars."

"What? Thunder! do ye hear that, Nibsy?" and Andy poked his friend so hard in his ribs as to almost upset him. "Five hundred? Jerusha blazes! ain't that a snap!"

"May I ask where you got this?"

"Ahem!" cautioned Nibsy, pulling at Andy's sleeve, but the 'longshoreman was now too much elated to be prudent.

"Got et fer stoppin' a runaway hoss, last night," he explained. "Me an' Nibsy saved the gal from gettin' left in the street, an' she give us a diamon' each fer pay."

"Rich pay, I'll be bound. How was it all?"

"Her hoss run away, an' throwed her cold. We picked her up an' took care of her."

"Acted the Samaritans," added Nibsy, abandoning hope of secrecy.

"Who was she?"

"Jest w'ot we'd like ter know. I guess we won't never do so, fer she took ship an' went off ter Nobody-knows-where."

Nathaniel held the diamond and looked at it curiously. The imperfectly told story would have been interesting at any time, but it was especially so now when diamonds was a subject of rare interest to him.

"Tell me all about it," he requested.

Andy was not unwilling. He was still elated over the magnitude of his prize, and he rattled the whole story off quickly. Nathaniel listened closely, and he had some questions to ask when it was finished.

"You say she had on a dress of unusual elegance?" he questioned.

"Jest as ef she had come right from a ball o' the Four Hundred."

"Rather an unusual costume for sea travel."

"I should say so."

"And she had a bag filled with diamonds?"

"Not a bag, but a pocket—a pocket right in her dress, here,"—the 'longshoreman illustrated—"an' it was full o' all sorts o' sparklers. Why, there must hev been a quart o' them."

"You say she went on board the schooner. What proof have you that she went on the craft when it sailed?"

"We ain't none."

"She might easily have left it?"

"Yes."

"Describe her!"

It was not an easy thing to do, but between Andy and Nibsy it was done. It left the detective more than ever interested; he had received a good description of Adrienne Everley!

Had the identity of the Lady of the Diamonds been solved?

CHAPTER X.

THE TOUGHS OF THE PIER.

NATHANIEL felt that he could not know too much about the matter, and as both Andy and Nibsy were now willing to talk, he learned about all they could tell before many minutes had passed. Presently they went out on the pier and stopped where Andy willed.

"Right there the schooner laid," explained the 'longshoreman.

Cooledge looked down at the dark water that rippled against the pier. He was near to the mystery, yet, in another sense, far from it. It was fascinating, puzzling and evasive.

"You say her name was the Tripping Mary?" he returned.

"Yes."

"Have you tried to learn her history?"

"A little, but I didn't get no more than I have told you. The schooner put inter New York with the statement that she had come ter carry some sort o' cargo ter Charleston, South Car'lina. She went all of a sudden, without no cargo."

"But with a woman?"

"Yes."

"Ef the woman went," added Nibsy.

"Mr. Hicks," continued Nathaniel, "are you good at remembering the faces of women?"

"I dunno. I guess so."

"You would know hers again?"

"Why, sure."

"As proof of it, would you know Adrienne Bunker if you were to see her again?"

"Ad Bunker? Why, bless ye, yes!"

Nathaniel shook his head.

"It requires an expert to remember the faces of the fair sex. Now, Mr. Hicks, take these two faces, Ad Bunker's and that of the Lady of the Diamonds. What was the chief difference between them?"

The detective listened eagerly for the reply. He had worked around to the point with great care, so as not to have his object suspected.

"There's a pile of difference," asserted Andy. "This woman was older than Ad was."

"You have not seen Ad for two years."

"That's so. I must make allowance fer that. Wal," thoughtfully added the 'longshoreman, "there may hev been some likeness between them. Yes, there may have been."

"Yet, the Lady of the Diamonds was not Ad?"

"Bless ye, no!"

"Mention the chief points of difference."

"Oh! the eyes wasn't jest the same, an' the nose—an' the mouth. Why, dang it, what be you drivin' at? This is all nonsense. W'ot ef I ain't an expert at recognizin' women? I should know this Lady o' the Diamonds ef I see her in Calcutta. Wouldn't you, Nibsy?"

"Sure!"

"That's all there is to it."

The 'longshoreman spoke with some stubbornness, and Nathaniel did not press the point. He had hoped by secretly getting Andy to consider the two women at the same time to demonstrate whether they were alike, but Andy could not, or would not, see any likeness. That he was really oblivious to a resemblance was not so certain, for the detective observed that he looked absently at the water and pulled his rough tuft of whiskers thoughtfully.

It was an irritating condition for Nathaniel to stand there and gaze at the vacant space in the dock where the Tripping Mary had been, but there was no help for it. The schooner would not reappear, and the Lady of the Diamonds was equally invisible.

The detective had no proof that he was on the trail of his mystery, but he did not intend to lose sight of Andy and Nibsy. It would not do to show unusual interest in their trophy, but returning to his desire of finding Ad Bunker, he asked for their addresses under plea of needing them again in that matter.

They complied with his request unhesitatingly.

Getting the exact number of Pearl street where 'Lizy Brown was said to live, Nathaniel then left his new friends. He went to the number, but he found the house closed.

As the hour was late he would have to wait until the next morning before getting news in that quarter.

Departing, he walked off without much heed to his course, but he was brought to his senses when he suddenly discovered that he had mechanically returned to the dock where the Tripping Mary had been, but was no longer.

Idly he walked out on the pier.

"It may be losing time to think of this at all," he murmured, "but a woman in a ball-dress with a pocket full of diamonds is a novelty. I would like to know where she is. Perhaps well on her way to some foreign port. If it was our Lynnfield thief it seems we have lost her. Still, Adrienne Everley remains in New York—Confound it, let me

get this off my mind for a little time and rest."

He sat down on a box, took off his hat, let the river breeze fan his brow and gazed around with appreciation of the scene. To a man who rarely sees the river-front at night, no place is of more interest. The panorama of the river itself is flanked on the one side by the lights of the opposite shore, and on the other by the strikingly grim, far-stretching line of piers, with the masts of vessels rising like sky-pointing finger-posts above the ragged line.

All this Nathaniel took in, and it may be, that he became too much interested in the spectacle.

He heard nothing about him to make him bestir himself, but the future told him that there had been need of bestirring.

Suddenly he was dashed to the pier, and the downfall had as an accompaniment a feeling as if his head had been riven by a lightning-bolt.

It was no new feeling to one who had long followed his calling, and he recognized one fact immediately—he had been felled by a blow of unusual force.

Rallying at once, he essayed to gain his feet, but he did not succeed. Again came the blow, and he was again felled.

"Chuck him inter the drink!" exclaimed a voice.

Nathaniel turned partly. He could see two men now, but before he had made out more they pounced upon him. He was lifted in their arms.

"Heave!" was the additional order.

They "heaved" in concert, but the detective had been allowed a little time and he improved it. He closed his hand on the sleeve of the man nearest to him and held fast. The check to their impetus nearly pulled all three into the dock.

"W'ot's the matter, Con?" demanded the further man.

"The bloke has gripped me arm."

"Break de holt!"

"I can't."

"Smash him in de jaw!"

This plan was well conceived, but Nathaniel was not disposed to let it go at that. He twisted away sufficiently to get his feet on the pier, and then a well-directed blow knocked the man Con several feet away and dropped him heavily.

"Allow me to do part of the 'smashing!'" requested Cooledge, coolly.

Con came up like a rubber ball, and then both rushed at him. He had the knowledge of pugilistic skill so necessary to all men, and he would have felt able to give them a warm reception, but the faint light suddenly showed him that each of his assailants had produced a stevedore's hook, and the prospect was not pleasing.

A blow from such a weapon might make an ugly hurt.

He backed off a little, looking in vain for help, but the men were not long to be evaded. Their rush was energetic, and he had to meet them. He struck and dodged almost at the same moment, and for a brief period held his own well, but one of the hooks caught in his coat and held fast.

"Smash him!" was again the cry.

A heavy blow staggered the detective, and then both of his assailants piled onto him at once. He was forced backward in spite of his efforts, and close to the dock.

All at once he caught the gleam of something brighter than the hooks.

"I'll make a sure job of it!"

So hissed the man who held the bright object, and then there was a sharp sting in Nathaniel's side. A moment later and he lost his footing and went down helplessly.

It was not far to the water, and he struck with a great splash. He went in under the surface, but he felt his energies unimpaired, and he lost no time in using the swimmer's art. He went a few feet, found a hold on one of the cross-timbers of the pier, and then became still.

He could dimly see the men peering down, but it seemed they could not see him.

"I reckon we hev done fer the bloke," exclaimed one.

"Oh! me knife did that."

"Where did you hit him?"

"Right in de heart."

"Then he ain't likely ter swim much."

"Bet yer socks he ain't. I got a clear

"swing an' give et to him fer keeps. He's gone up, sure!"

"Et will learn him not ter come nosin' around the 'longshoremen's region."

"Et's too late fer him ter learn, but he won't come again."

"Do ye suppose it was a detective?"

"I don't know, but ef it wasn't, why was he mousin' around where the Trippin' Mary lay?"

"That's so."

"Ef he meant any harm ter Flip Fan he just about got what he deserved. He came nosin', an' he found out he was in a hoss-race."

"We did give him a run fer his money."

"The 'longshoremen are a tough gang ter run up against, an' you an' I know it. Flip Fan is free from danger now, even if he was a detective."

"We may not be able ter do the sleight-of-hand act as well as she can, but we made dat bloke get out o' sight."

"Ha, ha!"

The second man laughed, and the first joined in the merriment, and they enjoyed themselves for some time.

Nathaniel listened to all, and he did more—he thought as he listened. He had gained considerable information. Con and his companion were interested in the Tripping Mary, and they knew something about a person they called Flip Fan. Who she was the detective did not know, but the human mind works rapidly when once suspicion is started. He did not forget that the Lady of the Diamonds was interested in the Tripping Mary, also.

He began to think that the haunts of the 'longshoremen were good places for him to frequent, himself.

"If I squeeze through this rub with my life I will look to these toughs," he thought. "I'll follow them to their lair."

CHAPTER XI.

THE HOME OF A HARD CROWD.

THE 'longshoremen finally decided that they had lingered long enough.

"There ain't a sound from him," remarked Con. "We may as well go."

"So we had. It's a good time, too, fer I see a policeman passin' by. We kin leave the pier directly, without the cop gettin' on to us. Ha, ha! ef he'd been around here he would hev seen some fun."

"Right you be, Aleck. But et's over now, an' we'll poke off."

Nathaniel Cooledge heard their steps as they receded, and he lost no time in getting up on the pier. It was not the easiest of tasks, but he worked with such energy that it was soon accomplished.

"The thugs are still in sight," he murmured. "I'll be after them. I wonder if that knife pricked me much. Certainly I am not hurt to any great degree, for my strength is unimpaired, but there is a prick."

He looked at his slashed sleeve, but the absence of any visible blood encouraged him not a little. He walked quickly after the pair of roughs, keeping as much concealed by objects on the pier as possible.

Con and Aleck had turned to the left when they left the place, and they were still to be seen, moving along South street. He followed as closely as was prudent, assuming a careless air, and keeping his head lowered.

The pursuit was short, and he saw them enter one of the dilapidated houses which had not yet succumbed to the encroachments of trade.

"Hived! It is a sailors's boarding-house, if the signs go for anything, but I presume 'longshoremen find quarters there also. Be that as it may, my men are there, and their air is that of persons who have reached home. I would quickly descend on them and show them the results of their attack on me, but I may be able to use them to better advantage."

Nathaniel was turning away when he ran into another person. He instinctively put up his hands, but a cheerful voice sounded in place of an attack.

"Hullo, boss! Be you round again? Hi! guess you've been in swimmin'; your raiment is as wet as that feller's in the show when he stays under water fifteen minutes by Timmy Flynn's watch."

The detective looked and recognized Nibsy King.

"So it is you?"

"Me or my ghost, which?—the lady or the tiger?" and Nibsy laughed good-humoredly.

"Where have you been since I saw you?"

"Went around ter a restaurant an' had some fish-balls. Andy's daughter works there as hash-slinger, and we both like her and fish-balls."

"Did you see the men who went in here?"

"Inter Dan Pratt's corral? No. Did they souse you with beer?"

"Not so bad as that. What sort of a place is it?"

"A good place fer funerals an' wakes, but not a snap fer a Quaker."

"Tough, eh?"

"Go in an' show a wad. Ef you don't get it where the chicken got the corn stuck, call me a hayseed fer information."

"It is a sailor's boarding-house, is it?"

"It used ter be, an' the sign says so still; but Jack Tars have mostly floated away from South street, an' now it's 'longshoremen who eat Dan's sole-leather. Hard place, you bet. Have you had a run-in with the gang?"

"Only a skirmish. I infer that you are not friendly with them."

"Friendly? Ef I be, they an' me don't know it. I've been at war with them fer seventeen out o' my eighteen years o' life. I've had sev'ral run-ins with them, an' though they go in gangs an' generally manage ter knock me out, they always know they've been in a horse-race when they git through with me."

"Are they really 'longshoremen?"

"Yes."

"They work, do they?"

"Yes, work an' scrap; an' slug other fellers fer cash when night makes et safe fer them."

"How much do you know about the ramifications of the party?"

"The rami— W'ot's that?"

"The off-shoots, the total branches that they have."

"Oh! I guess there ain't much ramble-fiction to them. They are jest a tough lot who smash heads an' law right along."

"Not a 'gang,' in the sense we use the word here?"

"No."

"They have women associates, haven't they?"

"Be them the ramblefictions? Never heard women called by that name before, by crickey!"

"What I want is to know if there are side-partners, women or men. A gang usually has offshoots."

"Correct; but there ain't no organization among them, I reckon. They are simply a tough lot of 'longshoremen who fight an' cut up rough when off duty. Don't judge all 'longshoremen by them. 'Longshoremen are men o' muscle, an' maybe a trifle hard-headed, anyhow, but not law-breakers as a rule. Them who herd at Dan Pratt's go there because they are tough from the word 'Go,' an' they like each other's company. No, I don't think they have any ramblefictions."

Nathaniel smiled briefly.

"Well, I don't suppose you would dare to go in there?" he continued.

"Inter Dan Pratt's?"

"Yes."

"Why not?"

"I understood you to say they were down on you—"

"Sure! But I am down on them, too. Ef I went in there might not be any rumpus, an' then, again, I might hev a scrap with them. That ain't nothin'."

"Can you take me in?"

"Now?"

"Yes."

"What fer?"

"Frankly, I want to learn all I can of them."

"Take yer time fer it, then. Ef you go in now you will likely git wiped off the face o' the earth. You ain't dressed right fer it, an' then, further, the clothes you do hev on are all wet. Them who fixed you out with a bath would get onto your curves in a jif."

"You are quite right; I was foolish to think of it. But suppose I come to-morrow night, disguised somewhat, and rigged out in clothes fit for a longshoreman? Can you take me in?"

"You kin take yerself in, ef you hev the cold, calm nerve ter try it. Legs will do et, fer they ain't exclusive. Further, I will waltz along like your twin, an' do all the good I kin."

"The bargain is made then."

"Be you some on the scrap?"

"Yes."

"You may need to take out a pugilist's license."

"All right."

"Say, boss, you hev a slash in yer sleeve."

"Merely a device to get more air."

Nibsy smiled humorously, not in the least at fault.

"Ef you need oxergin, or any sort of a 'gin' o' that sort, that crowd kin supply it. They open up cavities free, furnishin' knives whenever anybody else will furnish hides. See?"

Nathaniel did see, but he was not alarmed. He had been among tougher characters before, and he was willing to risk it again. He was well pleased with Nibsy King, and believed the stout youth would do all he could in a fight.

The new friends walked off, talking as they went, but the detective soon announced that he would go home.

"Won't you stay an' hev a plate o' fish-balls with me before you go?" asked Nibsy. "I'm livin' sorter swell now."

Nathaniel declined the invitation politely, and then they separated. The younger of the two looked after his late companion admiringly.

"Mister," he murmured. "I don't know who you be, but you are a peach!"

This was high praise on South street, and when it is recorded that Nibsy bestowed it so freely, it can well be understood that the night and day which followed were periods of impatient waiting on his part.

The next evening he was at the point set for the meeting long before the hour named. Nathaniel was on time almost to the moment. He shook Nibsy's hand cordially.

"Anything new?" he asked.

"Not a thing."

"Any signs of Dan Pratt's lambs?"

"Oh! they went ter biz as usual."

"Nothing more?"

"No."

"Well, let us go in. I have an excuse. I want to find—so I shall say—a man I used to work with as a 'longshoreman in Boston. I shall inquire for him. Of course he will not be found. This will give me excuse to linger there awhile."

"You've hit the football. Sail along, boss. All ready?"

Nathaniel was ready, and they went. No formality was necessary, and they walked into Dan Pratt's very calmly. Nibsy led the way to the main room, and the detective saw a good many men and a good deal of smoke which had risen from about as black pipes as could be found. The crowd was what he had expected—rough and ready, but, though he saw a good many hard faces, he could not see that they differed much from most men of the class.

They begun to use their eyes well. There was nothing in Nathaniel's appearance to arouse suspicion. He had donned the roughest of clothes and had a rough growth of whiskers, and his hands were browned to fit his pretended calling. Outwardly, he was what he claimed to be, a regular 'longshoreman.

Nibsy was among men who did not like him, but he remained as cool as if all were friends.

"Gents," he spoke, to the crowd, "here is a gazelle from Boston. He has a question to shout in yer ears."

"Yes," added Nathaniel, with all the seriousness possible, "I would like ter know ef you're acquainted with a feller in our business whose name is Ham Seeley?"

"W'ot is 'our business?" gruffly asked one of the crowd.

"I'm a 'longshoreman, an' I've been told most o' you are the same."

"Oh! all right. So you want Seeley? Wouldn't Ham Hogg do jest as wal?"

There was a laugh at his supposed wit, and Nathaniel joined as heartily as anybody. He was being gruffly received, but he saw nothing to indicate that he was to be rebuffed.

"Ham of hog is good," he replied, "but I know where ter find that. Ham Seeley I've lost sight of, an' as him an' me used to be quite chummy, I'd like ter place him."

"Let me see. Fellers, wasn't Ham Seeley sent ter Sing Sing?"

"Yes, fer stealin' a yeller dog. The dog ain't been found. Maybe this stranger is him."

CHAPTER XII.

THE STORY OF "A GREAT LITTLE GIRL."

NATHANIEL was being roughly joked, but he knew his companions' way, and he took it in good part. He made one or two jokes in return, and, as the 'longshoremen saw that they could not annoy him, they came down to business.

None of them knew Ham Seeley, and the questioner was so informed.

Their preliminary tactics had led to the complete breaking of the ice, and the detective saw the way clear to remain with them without exciting comment. There was only one system for getting their good will, and he took it.

"I happen ter be in luck now," he observed. "Who will join me in a glass of beer?"

Every man raised his hand, fully willing to let the stranger pay for what their stomachs craved. Nathaniel paid, and his standing was fixed for the time.

He sat down with the rest, with Nibsy near him. Nibsy had to take a few jokes much rougher than had been bestowed on his companion, for he was not a favorite, but he was cool under it all and peace continued.

The detective had been on the watch for Con and Aleck. He was not sure he would recognize them, but when Nibsy had given him a pre-arranged private signal he knew his late assailants were not present.

A general discussion took place, and the rough jokes made up a large part of it. Presently a man in trying to drink a glass of beer spilled the greater part of it.

"Say, Mike!" cried a comrade, "don't ye know the way ter yer mouth?"

"Ef he can't find that tunnel he would miss the East River, ef he went huntin' fer it."

"Why, the bridge cars could run through it."

"Trouble is, his ears are so big they flap down an' cover it up."

"Ef I had it, I'd let et out ter the city fer an underground railroad under Broadway."

The owner of the mouth thus derided took these jokes with equanimity.

"Et requires a sleight-o'-hand operator ter find his mouth every try," he replied.

"Hem, hem!" sounded deeply from one corner.

"Old Pop Timpe has woke up. W'ot is et, Pop?"

"Speakin' o' sleight-o'-hand reminds me of a gal I knowed once who was a corker in that line."

"Spit it out, Pop!"

"Give us the yarn."

The burly 'longshoreman thus called upon seemed to be a character. He cleared his throat in a manner which threatened to tear the roof off of his mouth, and then began in a muttering, chest-fixed voice.

"Et was one of our own trade, lads—leastwise, she used ter play on the piers when she was a kid; an' ef I recollect right she was a 'longshoreman's darter."

"Then she must have been a peach."

"She was a great little girl!" declared Pop.

"Is she in Sing Sing now?"

"Hush yer yawp! She wasn't the kind ter go there; she was too fly ter git ketched."

"Heave ahead, Pop."

"Wal, this gal—I don't remember her right name—used ter come an' play on the piers as a kid, as I said afore. I tell you she was a great little gal. Sharp? Nobody like her. Sassy? Had a tongue that cut like a knife. Bright? Why, say, she was a reg'lar

Dan'l Webster. Great favorite with us all, an' we humored her inter comin' down ter the river ter see us. We used ter joke her, an' she joked us.

"Finally we began ter miss little things. We couldn't tell where they went, an' the queer part of it all was that they disappeared right under our noses. We might be lookin' right at them an' they would get a hustle on an' skip out o' sight an' we be none the wiser.

"Et was a good while afore we tumbled, but we did, at last, when one o' the missin' things turned up sudden an' unlooked fer. That gal was cavortin around when et fell out o' her pocket.

"That settled et, an' had ketched our thief. She owned up, too.

"Then the question rose, w'ot was we ter do with her? Some said jail her, but she was so young an' so bright—great little gal, she was—that we mostly set down on it. We decided not ter do a thing, especially as some argued there was no malice aforethought in it all.

"The gal was jest as frank over it as you please, an' she showed us how she did it. Why, say, she was a reg'lar, natural-born sleight-o'-hand performer. Even when we was onter her curves she could swipe things right under our noses an' we never see it. I don't know how she did et, but no expert in shows could beat her.

"Speakin' o' yonder man's mouth an' sleight-o'-hand biz reminded me o' her! See?"

"Where is she now?"

"Dunno."

"Growed up?"

"She must be, fer that was a dozen or fifteen year ago."

"Didn't you never hear wo't become of her?"

Pop hesitated, and kicked a lank dog viciously before answering. Finally his desire to reveal all overcame his discretion.

"They do say that, as she growed older, she went wrong."

"How?"

"Ever hear o' Flip Fan, the pickpocket?"

"No."

"I hev, an' that was her, though when she was smaller she was a great little gal?"

"So she turned pickpocket?"

"Yes, she disappeared sort o' sudden from the piers, an' the story was told that she joined a show as an infant proggerdy in the sleight-o'-hand line, though I didn't never see her. Whether she stuck ter the show biz I don't know, but the pickpocket part comes straight. Yes, sirc, she was the noted Flip Fan. Et sorter makes me feel bad ter think of it"—here Pop kicked the dog again—"but I do tell yer that when she was on the piers she was a great little gal."

"Was she a success as a pickpocket?"

"They do say she was a corker! Et wasn't swipe a thing an' run, as some pickpockets do, but she could take a thing right under folks's eyes, and they never see et done. She was a holy terror, Flip Fan was."

"The smartest gals in New York are ter be found right along the river front," interrupted a second 'longshoreman.

"Or in the Bowery," ventured another.

"I say, by the river."

"Bowery gals see more varied phases o' life."

"Not half so many as the pier gals."

An argument was on, but Nathaniel Cool-edge gave it no heed; he did not care who out-argued the opposition. He had been the most devoted listener to the tale of the piers, and he was now all bound up in it. Well might he be.

Old Pop had told the story of a girl who had played on the piers; who had been bright and saucy, and a great favorite with the 'longshoremen; who had been the daughter of one of their own craftsmen; who had suddenly disappeared from the haunts where she had once been known, and at a period as suggestive as the story.

All this exactly fitted the account that had been given of Ad Bunker.

But the present story went further. Pop's "great little girl" had turned a sleight-of-hand performer and pickpocket, and had acquired the ability to steal things under the very eyes of other people and do it undetected.

He remembered that the Lynnfield jewels had been taken when all of their defenders were clustered around them.

Events seemed to be welding, and he had less reason to think well of Adrienne Everley, he believed, than before.

He did not forget that Con and Aleck had talked of a certain "Flip Fan," who was a noted character in their lives, and the detective would have been slow of suspicion if he had not drawn certain conclusions.

He had come there to see Con and Aleck, but he was not certain, now, that he wished to do so. It was sure that if the two toughs had guilty secrets they would not reveal them to the whole party of 'longshoremen, and nothing could be gained, then, by waiting until they came.

Nathaniel gave Nibsy a private signal, and then delayed until the present talk was fully done.

"You draw a fine picture o' the gal," remarked one of the men, "an' ef you get track o' her again, just invite her around. I reckon she will be jest as much of a favorite as she was in old days with you."

Pop grew irritated.

"Don't you think she would take up with you, Ben Peters?" he retorted. "When I see her last she was dressed to a kill, an' that took her right among the swells. Looked like a queen, she did; an' yet she was too young ter be fully ripe, as I may say. Don't you hanker, Ben; she ain't your kind. Mebbe she's dead; I dunno. Anyhow, she was a great little gal!"

Another man, perhaps envious of Pop's success as a story-teller, plunged in with an account of somebody he had known, and there was no more said about Flip Fan.

As soon as possible Nathaniel prepared to leave the resort, and he did so successfully. All of the 'longshoremen were cordial to him, and he improved the chance to say that if he did not find his alleged friend in a few days he should need work, whereupon he was promised the influence of his new friends, and their full support. He thanked them and went out with Nibsy.

"Wal," asked the youth, "hev you been paid fer comin'?"

"I think I have!" seriously answered the detective.

CHAPTER XIII.

RED EVIDENCE FROM THE FREIGHT-YARD.

THE following morning Nathaniel Cool-edge was no sooner out of bed than he wrote a note and dispatched it by a messenger, and his breakfast was not quite finished when a grim-faced man put in an appearance. His name was Horace Black; he was a detective.

He had come at Nathaniel's bidding, and announced that he was at his fellow detective's disposal.

Nathaniel had felt the need of an aid for a time, at least. Even with the uniformed police seeking to solve the mystery of the murder at Lynnfield's, duties pressed upon Cool-edge, and the possibility that he was entirely on the wrong track in thinking of certain events which might be connected with the robbery, led him to wish to give over the minor parts of the investigation to some one who could do them as well as himself, and leave him free to act elsewhere.

This was what Horace Black was to do for him, now.

The two men conferred for some time; then Black went away.

When Nathaniel had eaten and smoked he walked over to Lynnfield's.

He found no change there. Lynnfield, Count Altamonte, Barrington Oakes and Robert Houston were still grappling vainly with the conundrums of the hour.

The detective sat down to talk with them. He never had been in the habit of divulging his cherished theories and important discoveries, and he did not do so then. He seemed to talk freely, but said very little, really.

All seemed disappointed when they learned that there was no news. The excitable count had nearly worried himself into a state of nervous prostration over the loss of the jewels, and he lamented loudly and incessantly. Murdered Thomas Smith was still a minor feature of the case in the Lynnfield house.

When they finally consented to turn their minds to Thomas they had something to say from the regular police.

"They dispute your theory as to how Thomas was killed," remarked Lynnfield.

"In what way?"

"You ascribed it to the work of a man seeking to escape from the house with the stolen jewels."

"Yes."

"They think the murderer, or murderers, came in, not went out. In brief, that Thomas was killed so they could get in to perform the robbery."

"The point is immaterial."

"They believe it was done by what is commonly known as second-floor window robbers."

Nathaniel smiled grimly.

"Do they think the thief came in that way?"

"Yes."

"Then they had better catch him. With such a well-defined theory I see no reason why they should not succeed quickly. I dare say a man did leap in by a second-floor window, join us and seize the jewels. It looks very reasonable."

"Like you, I regard it as absurd," added Barrington Oakes, in his strong, straightforward manner. "Sarcasm, only, is fit to combat with such ridiculous theories."

At this juncture another man entered the room. He evidently had not expected to find a stranger there, and paused in the way of a well-bred man and would have retreated, but Barrington Oakes called him carelessly:

"John, this way. Mr. Cooledge is here, and, no doubt, would like to ask you about the sending of the message to the female reporter. Mr. Cooledge, this is Mr. John Berwick."

Nathaniel grew interested. He saw a young fellow of rather striking appearance. Mr. Berwick was not over twenty-three, one would say, and was pleasing to the eye. He was of blonde type, and his hair was of a yellowish tinge which made him impressive in a way. He had a well-colored face, marked only with a slight yellow mustache, and his slenderness of form gave him a sort of liteness and grace which went well with his faultless style of dress.

"I shall be glad to give any information I can."

With this statement Mr. Berwick came forward, paused behind a chair, swung a leg over the back and leaned forward in attention.

"I am pleased to see you, sir," began Cooledge; "I am told that the letter which summoned Miss Everley here to report the wedding was handed to you to mail."

"By the Count Altamonte," added Berwick.

"Allow me to ask just where you mailed that letter."

"In the street letter-box nearest this house, east."

"On the corner," murmured Lynnfield.

"Exactly."

"Pardon me," pursued Nathaniel, "but are you positive you mailed it there?"

"I am."

"Yet, Miss Everley denies that she received it."

Berwick smiled slightly.

"Yet she came."

"We say she did; she denies that, also. It is a general denial with her. The point is not material, if you are sure it was mailed there."

"I am; I will take my oath to that. I am not usually forgetful, and I regarded it as highly important that I should do this errand well. I did it well—at least, I mailed it."

"This is a mere form, of course; I was quite sure of it."

A servant entered the room.

"Mr. Lynnfield, excuse me, sir, but there is a man outside who wishes to see you."

"A man?"

"Yes, sir; a plainly dressed person, but honest looking. He says he has important business, but that he cannot tell it to me."

Seeing that Lynnfield hesitated the detective quietly remarked:

"My advice is that you turn nobody away at this time."

"It is good advice. Send him here, Enoch."

Enoch went out, and it was not long before the caller came. He was a man of middle age, stout and rather rough of appearance, but he had a good face. He looked the party over.

"I am Mr. Lynnfield," observed the master of the house.

"Maybe you would prefer to see me alone. It is about the things that I have read in the papers lately."

"What! do you mean the—"

"The murder, sir."

"Then speak right out; all here are as much interested as myself. Speak out, my man!"

The caller straightened up.

"I am George White," he stated. "I work over in the freight-yards in Jersey City."

This did not convey much to Lynnfield, so he merely made a gesture for the stranger to go on.

"There was a queer thing happened over our way," pursued the visitor, "and it was the night that murder was done in your house. You see, over our way we are not early to bed, for we have to shift cars around the yard and make up trains at all hours. I am night switchman in the yard, and I have to be there to help make up the trains."

Nothing seemed to be further from the murder mystery than this beginning. If he had spoken of a passenger station it would have been different, but a freight-yard—even ever-watchful Cooledge could not see much to hope for from that source.

"I stand down near the signal tower," White went on. "I never leave that place, for right there is my switch. You must know we don't have brilliant light there by a long shot. There is the light in the tower, but that is for the operator; and then the crew carry lanterns. The rest of the place is dark."

"Proceed!" directed Lynnfield, impatiently.

"Well, that night I was turning the switch for 73 when I happened to notice a man over by the tower. I didn't pay no great attention to him, for I thought it was one of the crew, but just afterwards the train was made up, and the conductor started toward the tower to get word from the operator. When he did that I noticed a man start quickly away from the tower, going off as the conductor came up."

"He went to where a flat-car was standing idle, loaded with iron. Then I lost sight of him."

"Wants to keep out of the conductor's sight," thinks I. "Wonder if he's a tramp?"

"I didn't see more of him for some time, but finally I thought I did catch another glimpse of him by the car. I allowed I was going to know more about the fellow, and I walked over that way. My man had been there, but he did not wait to be interviewed; he just took a skip and passed quickly off, going close to the tower to avoid me. As he did so I got quite a good look at him."

Mr. White's gaze had been wandering, and he now suddenly pointed to John Berwick and added:

"He looked about like that gentleman!"

It was a bit of unconscious dramatic acting, and it occasioned a peculiar feeling to all. Nathaniel Cooledge had been the first to turn his gaze upon John Berwick. He saw that young man leaning forward with his gaze fixed intently upon White.

There was something almost rapt and painful in this regard, but it was quickly broken. Berwick, finding himself the center of attraction, came out of his dream, if such it was, promptly and in good order. Advancing a few steps he smiled lazily and remarked:

"My good man, wait until your story is told before you take me as a dreadful example. I don't yet know whether to plead guilty or not. If your skulker was as painfully homely as myself, you did well to keep a watchful eye on him."

Barrington Oakes laughed heartily, and the count joined in the merriment less amusedly. He was impatient for the completion of the story.

"What next?" he inquired.

"Once more I lost sight of the man,"

added White, "and I saw no more of him for ten minutes, but I was not to lose him so quickly. At one side of the yard Number 94 was to be made up a little later, and when I happened to look over that way, there was my man—I knew him by his form."

"That time I was impatient, and I shouted to him angrily, and, as I had a lull in business, I walked quickly over there. I did not find him, but, as he seemed so pertinacious, I locked a couple of the cars from which he might have stolen things and then hid for some minutes."

"I had seen the last of the skulker, however; he did not appear again, and soon after 94 was made up and hauled out of the yard. Right here the story would end if it had not been for something I found in the yard, the next morning, close to where 94 had stood."

Mr. White advanced to the table and laid thereon a small cloth.

Red stains marked the article.

"A handkerchief, covered with spots of blood," he added; "and I found it near where my skulker had been!"

CHAPTER XIV.

VIVIAN.

COUNT ALTAMONTE made an impatient gesture.

"What of it?" he exclaimed. "What do the handkerchief and the spots of blood prove?"

"Look further," directed the switchman. "Do you see that?"

He raised the handkerchief a little, and a brilliant ray of light went out to the spectators. Count Altamonte leaped to his feet, and rushed forward. He seized the bit of muslin and held it aloft. His face glowed with emotion.

"A diamond!" he cried. "An ear-ring, and one of the lost collection!"

The whole party quickly gathered around the excitable Frenchman.

"Are you sure of what you say?" demanded Lynnfield.

"I am; I will swear to it; one of the diamonds is here!"

It was a thrilling sight to the party, as he stood with the handkerchief held forward. The red stains were very conspicuous, but they did not claim so much attention as another thing. Clinging to the center of the white square, was an earring, bright and brilliant!

"Great Heavens!" finally exclaimed Lynnfield, "if this is correct, how do you account for it?"

"Easy enough; this is the property of the thief," explained the count, almost dancing with excitement.

"Then the thief carried a woman's handkerchief!"

This remark, drily made, came from Cooledge, and it reminded them that he was still there. Oakes fell back a pace.

"Let Mr. Cooledge have charge here," he suggested. "We are good for nothing but to babble like old women."

The wisdom of this course was apparent, and the suggestion was acted upon. The detective took the handkerchief.

"I don't know that there is anything in this," pursued White, "but when I read in the newspapers of the murder and the lost diamonds I thought I would bring this here and see if the ear-ring could be identified."

"I will swear it came from my collection!" asserted the count.

"Have you seen anybody around the yard since who seemed to be hunting for a lost article?" inquired Cooledge.

"No, sir."

"And you have no proof that this was dropped by the skulker?"

"No. I just simply found it where he had been."

"All is clear!" declared the count. "It is a woman's handkerchief, and was lost by a man. That proves that the diamonds were stolen by the female reporter, and that she had an accomplice. The latter was over where this gentleman lives, and he dropped this muslin. In my opinion he went there simply to throw it away, as it was blood-stained, and he did so, but the ear ring accidentally caught in it and was also lost."

"You show remarkable inductive power count," replied the detective, so quietly that it was impossible to tell whether he spoke in sincerity or sarcasm; "but there are some flaws in the evidence as summed up by you."

"What are they?—what are they?"

"The supposed murderer, to get to the freight-yards, would have to cross the North River. In doing so he would have found a better place to throw away the handkerchief, if he so desired to dispose of it, than to go a long way and leave it where it was sure to be found in all its damning colors."

"Again Mr. Cooledge is right," asserted Barrington Oakes.

"More, if we claim that this handkerchief belonged to the murder's accomplice," pursued Nathaniel, "we are confronted with a singular fact."

"What fact?"

"This bit of feminine finery was Miss Vivian Lynnfield's."

"My daughter's?" cried Lynnfield. "How do you know that?"

"Observe the initials in the corner—'V. L. L.' How about that?"

"They are Vivian's sure enough," admitted Lynnfield, "and I do not doubt that this was her property."

"But," insisted the count, "how came the murderer with it?"

"First, we have no proof that the man who lost it was the murderer. Admitting that he was, there are a dozen ways he might have taken it along. Design or accident might have entered into it all through. The handkerchief may have clung to him by chance when he was in the house. It is useless to speculate now. I will investigate later."

Nathaniel tossed the handkerchief back on the table with a careless air and yawned. He did not look upon the matter so lightly as this would indicate, but he was of the opinion that he must squelch the count, and this was his first step. The Frenchman was marked out of the list of brilliant lights, whether yet eclipsed or not.

At this point Mr. White came to the front by explaining that he was not a man of leisure, and that he would have to do go back to his duties in the freight-yard. He was duly talked with and thanked, and then he went his way.

If possible, he left the party more muddled than he found them. While the count persisted in declaring that the ear-ring had been part of the collection once belonging to the Empress Josephine, they had to accept the skulker in the freight yard as a part of their riddle.

He puzzled all unless it was Nathaniel. The latter was unusually silent and serious, and even the questioning of his associates did not reveal his condition of mind.

He finally broke a long silence.

"As a matter of form we want this handkerchief identified. Mr. Lynnfield, will you oblige me by asking your daughter to come here?"

"Certainly. She shall come at once."

Word was sent by a servant, and the call was answered readily. It was not long before Miss Vivian entered the room. Probably she had not expected to see so many persons, and she paused near the door and seemed undecided whether to advance further or not.

Her father rose and went to her side.

"Don't be alarmed, Vivian," he kindly directed. "We only want you to see a certain article and tell us if it is yours. It is here."

"Here!"

Nathaniel added the word quietly, and then tossed the handkerchief on the table close to Miss Lynnfield. It spread out in part, revealing the gory stains fully, and Vivian, who had been advancing on her father's arm, recoiled from the sight.

Plainly, it frightened her. How could it have done otherwise, presented to her so injudiciously.

"Is it yours?" briefly inquired Nathaniel.

It was not the detective's fault that it had been sprung upon her so suddenly, but, since it had been done he felt at liberty to make the most of it. It remained for the impatient count to hurry matters still more. With singular want of delicacy in one so chivalrous, usually, he added quickly:

"The detective wants to know if this is yours."

Just then Barrington Oakes dropped a book he had been holding. It fell to the floor. He picked it up without comment, but the sound of its fall had been enough to break the spell which was upon the girl.

Nathaniel noticed that she turned her gaze upon Mr. Oakes. Did Mr. Oakes wave his hand peculiarly? Nathaniel thought so, though he was not so placed as to be sure.

"The handkerchief has your initials upon it, Miss Vivian," remarked Barrington, mildly.

"It is not mine!"

She made this assertion without further look at the bit of linen, and almost with the mechanical action of a machine. Then Mr. Oakes rose quickly, went to her side and took her arm with grave respect. He seemed to steady her.

"I judge that Miss Lynnfield is faint," he added. "This has been too sudden for her. Kindly give her a moment for reaction. Miss Vivian, come to yonder window."

He led her away, and, pushing the lace curtain aside, ensconced her in its cover.

"Just like Barrington," remarked the count. "Ever thoughtful of others, and ready to act with judgment at all times. He is a remarkable man. Even France would be proud of him."

"It comes of having a level head," added John Berwick.

Nathaniel Cooledge said nothing. He even seemed to have grown careless and sleepy. He yawned and partially closed his eyes. It may be added that he shut out nothing. His gaze wandered secretly to the window.

Was he mistaken, or was Barrington Oakes talking with Vivian almost fiercely? Did he make a threatening gesture?

The wind fanned the pair by the window and moved the curtain in graceful billows. Then it was pushed aside and they came forth. Oakes still supported his companion.

"Miss Vivian is better," he announced. "We should have remembered that she had already gone through a great shock. Miss Vivian, oblige us by looking at the handkerchief."

It was the air of a man who gives deep homage to womankind and tries to soften all their burdens. To some there it seemed to be a leaf from courtly politeness. He led Vivian to the table.

She still showed a disposition to shrink from the gory handkerchief, but she did not fully yield to the impulse. Instead, she regarded it with a degree of firmness.

"It is mine," she replied.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"When did it leave your possession?"

"I cannot tell that; it is one of many."

"In brief," added Oakes, "you have a large assortment, and do not keep track of any, especially. Is that it?"

"Yes, sir."

Barrington looked critically at the lady. "She still seems faint. Is it necessary to keep her here?"

"Not at all," responded the detective.

"She can go. Accept our thanks, Miss Lynnfield."

She went, and the men had more to say of the handkerchief. Presently Nathaniel turned to Mr. Lynnfield.

"Will you walk with me, sir?" he asked.

The host surveyed his companion questioningly. He received no clue, for the detective was wholly mute, but there was something which led the older man to answer:

"With pleasure."

He found his hat, and they went out together.

"I wish you to call on Miss Adrienne Everley," explained Nathaniel.

"Why?"

"She denies that she was at the wedding. I want you to decide that. I saw her for but a moment, literally. It was different with you. You should be able to say positively if our reporter was she."

"I can say positively when I see her. But, suppose she still denies it all?"

"Then it will look bad for her."

"And we can rest assured she is the guilty one. Good!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE DETECTIVE SEES SOMETHING.

A CAB was procured, and Nathaniel and Mr. Lynnfield continued their journey. The latter broke a short silence with the remark:

"Mr. Oakes is very helpful to us in this crisis. Did you notice how delicately he handled Vivian's case, and shielded her from too much contact with the blood-stained handkerchief?"

"Yes."

"A remarkable man, Oakes is."

"Do I understand that he is a friend of the count's?"

"Yes. Altamonte has a strong fancy for him, and well he may have. Mr. Oakes is always cool and able, and he is a rock of help to us now. A great man!"

"Cool and nery, I admit."

Lynnfield had more that was complimentary to say of Barrington Oakes, but the detective had paid his compliment and he let it rest at that. Ever alert to notice small things, he was now of the opinion that, to say the least, there was something of the tyrant in Oakes's nature. If it was not that, it was more.

In due time the two men reached Miss Everley's home. She was in, and they had no trouble in gaining admission to her rooms.

She received them calmly and politely. Lynnfield was not so polite. He forgot that he was a well-bred man, and precipitately exclaimed:

"That's the woman!"

Nathaniel gazed at the female reporter. She was calm under the assertion, though she must have known what it meant.

"Miss Everley," spoke the detective, "this is Mr. Lynnfield."

"Am I to hear more of that absurdity?" she exclaimed, impatiently.

"Do you object?"

"I do, decidedly."

"Are you going to deny to my face that you were at the wedding?" sharply demanded Lynnfield.

"I am!"

"Then you speak falsely!"

"Sir?"

"Hang it all! do you want me to shut my eyes to facts? I engaged you; you came; you were at the wedding. Why deny it?"

Miss Everley was outwardly as calm as Nathaniel, himself.

"Gentlemen," she replied, "let us use common sense here. It seems from your claims that somebody has been masquerading as Adrienne Everley, and that you have been deceived. If you will be reasonable you may learn who it was, but if you hold your head in the sand as an ostrich is said to do, you will never get at the facts. I was not at the wedding. Take my word for it, and look for the person who was."

"Again I ask you, can you prove that you were here in this room, at that time," inquired Nathaniel.

"I cannot."

"I think we can prove by a score of persons that you were at the wedding."

"Then you are all deceived by a resemblance."

"Nonsense!" cried Lynnfield.

"Miss Everley, we want to clear you if we can," earnestly replied the detective. "Unless you are so cleared, there is a serious charge hanging over you."

"Meaning participation in robbery and murder?"

"We have not accused you of anything. What we do say is that you were at the wedding."

"I will swear to it!" declared Lynnfield.

"Then you will swear falsely!" retorted the girl.

"Cooledge, can't you do the same?" sharply asked Lynnfield.

"No," replied Nathaniel. "I saw the reporter of that occasion only for the briefest moment. She looked as this lady looks, but I had such a transient, trivial view that I cannot swear they were the same."

"I can swear they were!" asserted Lynnfield.

Miss Everley had been toying with a sheet of manuscript. She now laid it down with a decisive air.

"It is hard for an innocent person to be accused thus," she pursued. "It gives one a feeling of resentment which bids her say to

the accusers, 'Go ahead and do your worst; I need not care, for I am not guilty!' Now, however, I will crush down this feeling. I will try to clear myself."

"Good!" exclaimed Nathaniel. "We will heartily congratulate you when it is done. How will you clear yourself?"

"By finding the real reporter of that time!"

"Is there no other way?"

"None!" she interrupted.

"But be frank with us—"

"I do not lock arms with my accusers!"

With this terse reply she picked up her manuscript again with the air of a business person whose time admitted of no further delay in attention to important matters. Her coolness dazed Lynnfield and showed both that they had a resolute opponent.

The callers exchanged glances.

"We may as well give this up!" murmured Lynnfield, mechanically.

"Miss Everley, may I ask you one question alone?" pursued Cooledge.

"If it will do you any great good."

Nathaniel did not heed the very apparent rebuff, and Lynnfield took the hint and went out. Miss Everley looked up and curtly, yet not rudely asked:

"Well?"

"A member of Lynnfield's household swears that he mailed a letter written to you, to ask you to attend the wedding. Did you get that letter? You denied it before. What do you say now?"

The reporter did not reply at once. She allowed her gaze to stray from her companion and become fixed on vacancy. Finally the gaze was swiftly returned to the detective.

"Look to the person who says he mailed that letter as the thief, or murderer, or one of them!" she exclaimed.

"Why?"

"Somebody is lying. It is not I. Then it must be he!"

Nathaniel was silent. The way she had put the case was as telling from the point of her manner as were the words.

"Who was this person?" she added presently.

"His name is John Berwick."

"What is he?"

"A friend of the Lynnfields."

"Young?"

"Yes."

"A discarded suitor of Miss Lynnfield's?"

"I think not."

"Poor?"

"He does not seem to be."

"Watch him!"

With this terse direction the reporter again picked up her paper.

Nathaniel opened his lips to speak, but thought better of it and said nothing. He moved quietly to the door. Miss Everley's pen began to move with steadiness and rapidity.

"Good-day!" spoke Nathaniel.

"Good-day, sir!"

The reporter did not look up, but, having reached the last line of the page, lifted her hand and wrote a "head" for the article. The detective, lingering, saw the boldly-penned words—"Dress Reform!"

He turned and went out.

"A woman of magnificent nerve!" he murmured.

Joining Lynnfield they went to the street and away from the vicinity. They talked, and Lynnfield was emphatic in his accusations against the reporter but Nathaniel had little to say. They soon separated, and the detective pursued his way alone. Believing it was time for him to have a report from Mr. Black, his detective aid, he intended to go home and see if the man or the report was there.

He was still on his way when he was aroused from thought abruptly.

He never allowed himself to become blind to things about him, and two persons suddenly absorbed his attention as he turned a corner. They stood on the sidewalk in close conversation.

"John Berwick!"

He murmured the name half-unconsciously. Then his gaze flashed to Berwick's companion. A more dissimilar pair it would have been hard to find, and Nathaniel lost nothing.

Berwick was delicate, neat, well-dressed.

his associate was rough, burly and very coarsely clad.

"A remarkable pair. What has John to do with him?"

Berwick appeared to have much to do. His uncouth companion was doing most of the talking, and seemed to be excited. In this Berwick reflected his mood. The aristocrat of the pair asked question and gave closest heed.

"Strange!" muttered Nathaniel. "He has bad news, I should say."

Surely, John was bound up in the talk, and he began to make sweeping, excited gestures. He now poured forth words rapidly, and the rough young man did the listening.

"I wish I could overhear that conversation," thought Nathaniel.

He could not, and he had to be satisfied with watching at a distance. He could not long do that. Berwick and his companion came to some conclusion, and then appeared to be on the point of separating.

"The show is over for now," mused Nathaniel. "I am not going to lose all traces of the event. If I can't know all, I can, at least, learn something. I will do it!"

CHAPTER XVI.

AN OLD SALT WITH A GRIEVANCE.

JOHN BERWICK walked off one way, and the hard-looking man went the other. Nathaniel fell in behind the latter and followed quietly and skillfully. It was his purpose to have the hard-looking person and then learn more of him.

This was not done because of Adrienne Everley's advice, but with well-defined motives.

The unknown man led his pursuer a pretty chase. The journey was so long that anybody but a hard fellow like the unknown would have taken a car. Nathaniel often wished he would, but it was not done.

The pursuit finally took them to City Hall Park, and then the leader struck off down toward the "Swamp." He did not pause even there, and the detective began to have suspicions which were verified when they struck South street and turned toward the lower point of the city.

They were not to go all the way, and the final sensation came when the unknown abruptly entered Dan Pratt's boarding-house. He disappeared, and Nathaniel was left outside to meditate. He was still occupied thus when a voice sounded by his elbow.

"So you've had a run-in with Con?"

Nathaniel wheeled suddenly. Nibsy King was there.

"Oh! so it's you?"

"No," seriously answered the youth, "it's my brother."

"Your joke is as sensible as my own speech, and more witty. What did you say about Con?"

"You've been pipin' him, I see?"

"Who is he?"

"Why, that's Con, the man who slung you inter the dock; he's Aleck's chum. Didn't you know him?"

"Are you sure it was he?"

"Boss, him an' me hev licked each other at least forty times apiece in the last eighteen years. Hadn't I ought to know him?"

"You had, indeed. So he is the person I have followed to his lair?"

"Right. That's Con."

Nathaniel was silent. He had not forgotten the wolves of the dock, nor lost his interest in them. He was wondering how Con happened to be in conversation with John Berwick.

"Say, boss," pursued Nibsy, "do ye want ter git pointers on the Trippin' Mary?"

"What, on the schooner? You bet I do."

"Skim yer eye over there. See the sassy-lookin' three-master?"

"Yes. Do you mean—"

"That's the Trippin' Mary."

"Back again?"

"Back in the old dock."

"I am surprised. How did it happen?"

"Can't say. She ain't been in more'n half an hour, an' they have only got her fixed ter suit them. The captain has jest got ashore an' ambled inter that saloon fer a bracer."

Nathaniel was alert. It was a good sight

to see the Tripping Mary, but the Tripping Mary was speechless. He wished to see somebody who could talk, and he caught at the news that the captain was near.

"What does he look like?"

"Oh! he's a rough-an'-ready old Jack Tar."

"Tough?"

"Not specially, as I seen. Go an' look at him."

The saloon was not far away, and they went to the door. When they arrived there they "seemed to have struck the business end of a cyclone," as Nibsy expressed it. A man was talking inside, and his voice was a deep and far-reaching roar. More, it was angrily pitched, and the detective paused to listen.

The remarks within may well be omitted. They were startling only for their emphasis, and not free from charge of undue vehemence. The man was angry, and swearing without much regard to anything but emphasis.

He was a rough-looking old chap, dressed in sailor's apparel, and clearly a follower of the sea. What the cause of his anger was did not appear in his remarks.

Nathaniel obeyed a sudden impulse and walked in. Straight up beside the seaman he went.

"Seen Tom Wilson in here?" he asked of the barkeeper.

"Don't know him."

"No? Him and me was ter have a drink. I hate ter drink alone. Captain, will you join me?"

The last was to the sea-dog, who had left off roaring for a moment. He did not look amiable, but he had been touched in his weakest point, and he readily agreed to drink.

"I am goin' ter drink New York dry!" he asserted. "I am goin' ter fill my stomach with whisky until the bar-rails will bend up under my weight, by thunder!"

Then he added a few strong words which need not be repeated, and the roar of his angry voice increased in volume.

The detective was all in the dark, but he was patient and persistent. There was a little room off of the main one, and he invited the sea-dog in to sit down. He was not refused, and they were soon at a table. The violence of the older man did not abate, and Nathaniel proceeded to handle him with due care. Asking no rash question, he let the sailor work around to the case himself, but, when the plum was ripe, he mildly inquired:

"What has gone wrong with you?"

"What has gone wrong? Say, what's gone right?"

"Well, you know I am not aware of who you are—"

"Sam Dodds, captain o' the schooner Trippin' Mary!"

"Is she a Down East trader?"

"Hang it! she was, but the Lord knows w'ot she is now."

"How is that?"

"I've been made a fool of!"

"Go away! It would take a sharp person to do you up."

"No, any fool kin do it; I know et now."

"I am sorry for you, captain."

"Sorry? Wal, when I do murder, jest you come around an' see me hung. That may make you feel happier, it will me! Say, lad, stow away another drink an' then I'll tell you all about it. When I am done I am goin' out ter kill somebody!"

It was a sanguinary statement, but Nathaniel did not think the unknown Somebody need to be so very much alarmed. Captain Sam Dodds was a violent old fellow, but he did not look like a murderer, even in his wrath.

"I suppose some other captain has used you mean," suggested Nathaniel.

"I don't suppose anything o' the sort. Ef any Jack Tar kin do me up, he's welcome an' I won't say a word, but—wal, you shall hear. This is the way the wind blows."

"I own the schooner Trippin' Mary—named her after my gal, Mary—one o' the finest gals you ever see, sir—an' she plies between jest what ports I see fit. She ain't in no particular trade, but when I see fit ter take a job I do it. Darn me, ef I don't want ter take any job I don't do it; I've got some greenbacks in the cabin, by thunder!"

"Wal, I come inter New York an' give the lads a holiday, an' we was still in the dock when a man come ter me on the deck an' wanted ter hire me an' the Trippin' Mary."

"There was a good deal o' mystery about it from the first. He never would face me in good light, but jest talked on the deck an' kept in the dark as much as possible. Struck me, too, that he was more or less disguised, so I wouldn't know him."

He said I was ter go out ter sea fer him, but go mighty light. Summed up this was it. Sometime there was a young woman goin' ter come on board the Trippin' Mary an' say ter me: 'I'm your cargo! Put out ter sea!'

"Of course there was a lot o' talk ter make this plain, but that was the sum o' the whole thing."

"Now, I ain't no pirate, an' no thief—never was crooked even when I was poor; an' I naturally objected ter all this. I told him I wanted ter know what was up before I consented ter go on the mysterious voyage—Did I tell you we wasn't to know our destination until we was well outside, an' then the gal was ter tell me? Wal, that was the way, anyhow."

"When I made this kick the feller said he would tell me all—it was an elopement. A rich man's daughter loved a poor young man, an' the old chap was makin' it rough fer her. She was goin' ter escape as soon as she could an' come right ter the Trippin' Mary."

"My mysterious passenger was ter be her. "Now, sailors sorter take ter lovers, an' I fell inter this trap. I agreed ter do the job. Arrangements was made. I was ter give out that we was lyin' there waitin' ter take a cargo which was ter go ter Charleston, South Carolina."

"We waited, an' every night we was all aboard, an' all arranged so we could skip immediate when our fair passenger come."

"Three nights passed without anything happenin' an' then we got our orders. One night, about eleven o'clock, when I was in my cabin, one o' the sailors—old Tom Jenkins—rushed in all in a flutter."

"'Captain, the beauty has come!' says he, breathless."

"I made a rush fer the lookin' glass ter primp up a bit, an' I'll be blowed ef I wa'n't still at it when in come Peter Moss, my mate, an' with him was the mysterious gal."

"Yes, siree," added the captain, with emphasis, "the wait was over an' the time was come ter set sail—the ship wasn't no lonesome grave no more; the beauty was with us!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MYSTERY OF THE TRIPPING MARY.

NATHANIEL COOLEGE had grown deeply interested. As Captain Sam Dodds paused the detective leaned forward and demanded eagerly:

"What was she like?"

"Lord!" replied Captain Sam, "I don't know. I could take a Down East gal an' describe her nigh about as wal as I could the schooner I had built under my own eyes, but this feminine—say, you've seen a thistle bud after it's blowed out, ain't ye?"

"Yes."

"Wal, that was her. She wasn't no etherial angel, fer she had muscle o' plenty; but she was all dressed up in fluffy stuff which was jest killin'. Et may have fitted her, but there was humps an' hollers where no Down East gal has them when she has got on her fine clothes; an' this gal—wal, stranger, you may be a single man, so I'll only say this gal's dress was longer at the bottom than the top."

"A ball-dress?" asked Nathaniel.

"Wal, Peter Moss, he did say et was the sort city gals wore ter balls an' the like, but I dunno, I dunno!"

"Go on, go on!"

"Wal, there she was, finery an' all. I nearly fell over in tryin' ter act polite, but, land sakes! wasn't she cool!"

"'Captain Sam Dobbs,' says she, 'I am your cargo. Put out ter sea!'"

"That was the agreed-upon password, you'll mind, an' I had nothin' more ter say. I did try ter say more, but she sorter waved me off an' says: 'Spread yer sails now, cap'n; you an' me will talk at breakfast all you wish!'"

"Stranger, it wasn't this allurin' promise o' hers, but I had agreed ter git under way and hump it out o' New York Harbor as quick as possible when she come on board, an' I started ter do it. As we moved she added that she didn't want ter be disturbed at all until daylight. 'I am too nervous to see anybody,' says she."

"She didn't look nervous, but we took her at her word. Tom Jenkins was selected ter show her the state-room she was ter occupy, an' then the rest o' us tumbled on deck."

"I allow that I have about as spry a set o' sailors as they make, an' when we got ter biz an' made ready ter go we humped things. In three jiffs the Trippin' Mary was out o' the dock; in a few more she had left the river, an' then we scud down by Governor's Island an' made fer the Narrers. Finally, we was out ter sea."

"I put all o' Trippin' Mary's clothes on, an' we jest hummed sharp an' lively. I didn't go below, but Tom Jenkins come up an' did his share, an' he said the gal was makin' herself at home when he came up—of course he joined us before we sailed."

"I only took a short sleep that night, fer there wasn't much o' the night ter do it in, an' I was bound the gal should have a stunnin' breakfast. I watched the cook an' nagged him so about it that he got mad, but we finally had a breakfast that would fit a queen."

"Our passenger had not showed up, so I went an' knocked on the door o' her state-room. I didn't get no answer, so I decided ter let her sleep all she wanted ter. I eat the breakfast I had planned for her."

"We bowled along right smart until noon, an' then I looked fer our angel ter join us. She didn't, though, an' I'll be blowed ef we see a sign o' her. The cabin boy had said he heard her cryin' inside, an' that sorter scared us off, so we let things rest until night. Still no gal."

"Then we held a conference. We all agreed there was somethin' mighty odd about it, an' we decided that we ought ter investigate. I'm ashamed ter say that, when it come ter the scratch, nobody was plucky enough ter smash in the door, an', like a set o' chumps, we waited until the mornin'—oh! what darned fools we really was!"

"Then we did break in. You kin guess it; the state-room was empty!"

Captain Sam Dodds paused, and the detective eagerly inquired:

"And the girl?"

"Was in New York!"

"How do you know?"

"Ef she sailed with us, where was she?"

"Might she not have committed suicide?"

"Yes, an' so might I, but I didn't."

"The cabin-boy heard her cryin'—"

"He dreamed it."

"It seems almost impossible that she should have come to the schooner and then not have sailed. If she did not intend to go with you, why did she put in an appearance?"

"A trick!"

"In what way?"

"Tell me that an' I'll thank you; I don't know."

"She may have fallen overboard by accident."

"Or gone up in the sky!" sarcastically added Captain Sam Dodds.

"Of course you had received your pay—"

"Of course I am a blowed fool!" roared the skipper. "I didn't do nothin' o' the sort. I was paid a few dollars, but I was ter git a perfect bonanza when I was out o' sight o' Sandy Hook. I didn't get no bonanza at all; I was done up fer a sucker, sure."

"But the object of such a trick?"

"I dunno."

"Would you know the girl who fooled you so?"

"You bet, an' I will know her, too. I'm goin' ter hunt her down, an' when I find her I will make Rome howl."

"And the man who made the bargain—would you know him?"

"I dunno about that. The idee is in my noddle that he was disguised, an' that it won't be no picnic ter recognize him."

"Was he short or tall?"

"Tall an' big. He had a tremendous

stomach onder him, too. Must have weighed a good two-fifty or more."

"But you would know the girl?"

"Yes."

Nathaniel allowed a half-smile to go over his face. He believed he had not only advanced a step in the game, but gained an aid who would be of help to him. From the first he had felt that the mystery of the Tripping Mary connected with his case, and now he was convinced of it. He was, however, left more in the dark than ever.

What had become of the passenger on the schooner?

If she had really deserted the Tripping Mary before leaving the dock, why had she come on board at all?

Had she fallen overboard by accident, or leaped over with suicidal intent, or in what quarter did the explanation lie?

He could not tell, but Captain Dodds persisted in his assertion that she must have left the schooner before they sailed, and he avowed his intention of finding her and making somebody pay him handsomely for his fruitless cruise.

Nathaniel humored the old salt in his desire for satisfaction, and he did more. Keeping the fact secret that he was a detective, he represented himself as one who knew many people in New York, and had ways of getting at secrets, and he promised to aid Captain Dodds if the latter would form an alliance with him.

This the sailor promptly agreed to do.

Nathaniel would have taken him in tow at once, but the captain declared he must return to the Tripping Mary and sleep, so it was agreed that the detective should return to him there, that evening, and they could formulate a plan.

With this understanding they separated.

Nibsy King had waited outside. Nathaniel saw him and made arrangements by which he was to watch around the dock where lay the schooner, and be ready to report anything that might occur before night.

Then the detective went home.

He found Horace Black, his detective aid, awaiting him.

"News?" he questioned.

"A little," replied Black.

"What is it?"

"I have been on the track you set me upon. I went to see about Old 'Lizy Brown, once housekeeper for Dad Bunker, the 'longshoreman."

"'Lizy has gone to rejoin Dad Bunker. She is dead, and has been for two years."

"Were you baffled?"

"No; I have some news of Ad Bunker."

"Good!"

"When she first disappeared from the piers she obtained a situation as a typewriter in a law-office—a fine situation, and one of such a confidential, responsible nature that she received much better pay, I am told, than is usual to such places. That explains how she happened to return briefly to those who had known her when she was only a ragged girl playing on the piers, and return handsomely clad."

"And then?"

"'Lizy Brown died two years ago. Ad Bunker attended her funeral, and she told some of her old friends that she was going to leave New York for the summer; that she had secured a good position for the season as stenographer at a noted summer resort, and that she going to mix in with it the corresponding with two city papers—sending in the gossip about swelldom, I suppose—so that it was a very good thing for her."

"And then?" added Nathaniel.

"There is no more. From the day of 'Lizy Brown's funeral Ad Bunker has not been seen in South street or its vicinity."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FERRY-HOUSE ENCOUNTER.

NATHANIEL COOLEGE had listened attentively, and with considerable satisfaction. All he had heard agreed with his theories, and he regarded it as proven that Adrienne Everley and "Ad Bunker" were one. The ex-pride of the piers had last been heard of as a venturer into the realm of journalism. Miss Everley was firmly fixed there.

"Did you question persons closely as to

other things mentioned by me?" pursued Nathaniel.

"I think I may say I forgot nothing," replied Black.

"Did anybody ever hear that Ad Bunker was for a time connected with a show?"

"No."

"Or that, as a girl, she had the gift of sleight-of-hand?"

"Nobody ever heard of it."

"Or that she amused the 'longshoremen'—'amused' is a polite way of putting it—by causing their belongings to disappear mysteriously?"

"Nobody ever heard of it."

"She was not an embryotic thief?"

"No."

"You mean, Black," amended Nathaniel, with some asperity, "that you did not find anybody who was among those who once knew of such things—that you did not strike the right parties for such revelation?"

"I mean," composedly answered Black, "that I found people who knew Ad Bunker intimately in her childhood. They never knew that she was gifted with sleight-of-hand skill, and they aver most decidedly she never meddled with any other person's property, even in sport. She is said to have been very carefully reared, first by her mother, and then, on the latter's death, by Old 'Lizy Brown; and though she was bright and keen-witted, she was not mean, dishonest or wayward. So say her old friends."

"Humph! This does not agree with the history of Flip Fan, as told in Dan Pratt's den."

"It strikes me Flip Fan was another person."

"She played on the piers; so did Ad Bunker."

"So do, and did, hundreds of other children."

"You think Ad and the sleight-of-hand girl were not the same person?"

"If I am correctly informed, they were not. Yet," added Black, slowly, "their history is much alike. Possibly my informants wished to shield Ad Bunker."

"The theory is reasonable. Well, did you go to Police Headquarters?"

"Yes. They have a record of Flip Fan, a pickpocket, and undoubtedly the one of whom you heard; but it is a brief record. She was once arrested, but her true name was not learned, and she escaped conviction in some way. They have no more of her."

"Horace, I wish to pursue this inquiry. Learn who Flip Fan was. Learn her true name. More, look up the officers who arrested the adult Fan, and get her late history."

"I will try to do all this."

"Do so, by all means. I am interested in Flip Fan—more, I am interested in all children who played on the piers in her day. Look into it, Mr. Black."

"Do you want this information quickly?"

"Immediately!"

"Then I can get it this very day. The record at Police Headquarters told who arrested her and I remember the man well. He is now retired, but lives over in Hoboken. He can be found there, I suppose."

"I have a good mind to run over and see him, myself," mused Nathaniel. "Is it far on the other side of the river?"

"Quite the contrary. Cross by Christopher street ferry and you are almost there when you land."

"I want to go; I want to learn more of this matter, and do it without delay, and perhaps I can question the retired officer better than you can, unless I devote much time to instructing you. Write out the name and address, and I'll take a run over."

Black complied, and, equipped for the investigation, Nathaniel was soon on his way. He crossed the North River and reached Hoboken. From that point it was easy to reach the end of his destination.

He found the retired officer and talked the matter over fully, but without the degree of success he had hoped for. Abridged, this was the story of Flip Fan, as his informant remembered it.

She had been a performer in a show, and singularly skillful for one so young, especially as it was said that she had been but briefly in the business. Her sleight-of-hand tricks made her sure of a good salary and

she was in demand at all times. She was partner to a man known as Signor Fezzetti; a man who had promptly fled when she got into trouble, though there was no reason to think him accessory to her misdeeds.

Flip Fan's weakness was that she had an abnormal liking for other people's possessions, and she carried the fondness so far as to purloin them. Fellow performers, hotels and trains suffered, though her boldest gains were made in public, among women shoppers and on the streets frequented by such shoppers.

When she was arrested it was hailed as a great catch, but Flip Fan never was convicted. What influence was brought to bear was not known, but nobody appeared against her when she should have been tried, and she was discharged for want of evidence.

The presiding justice was indignant, and so was the officer who had seized the pickpocket, but that did no good—Flip Fan went clear.

Little was learned of her at her trial. She carried an Italian name in her business, but she was so plainly a New York girl that it was rejected as being her own. Her true name was not ascertained.

Nobody appeared for her but her lawyer, so her friends remained unknown.

Signor Fezzetti was not suspected by anybody, and he was scared nearly out of his not over-strong wits by the affair. When he fled it was owing to his fright, not to guilty participation in her crimes.

This was all that Nathaniel learned.

He wended his way back toward the ferry-house, disappointed, but not discouraged. He believed that something would yet be learned of Flip Fan.

Reaching the ferry-house, he went in and waited for the boat. He had considerable on his mind, but he never allowed that to make him oblivious to what was going on around him. The ferry-house was well filled, and he looked to see who was there.

"Barrington Oakes!"

He murmured the name with considerable surprise. He had not expected to see anybody from Lynnfield's, yet there stood Barrington, his tall form looming up above the rest of the patrons of the ferry.

He stood as near to the slip as was possible, and was looking out toward the New York side.

Nathaniel rarely allowed himself to be companionable with a man in his detective cases unless he wanted to learn something. He had no reason to suppose that Mr. Oakes could help him, so he kept his place quietly. It seemed that Oakes was waiting to cross to New York, and this would make them companions further.

A boat from New York entered the nearest slip. People crowded close to the door, waiting for the opening of the barriers when the other passengers were off. Nathaniel joined the rear of the group.

Presently the travelers began to flock forward. A rain had come up suddenly, and but few were equipped with umbrellas. Such as were thus supplied hastened away, but others showed that they intended to linger and avoid a wetting.

Barrington Oakes's manner now became such that Nathaniel paused and watched him.

Oakes did not hasten forward, but stood and surveyed the people from New York closely. Suddenly he hurried forward, and the detective saw him seize a lady by the arm. She turned with a startled air and faced him. The movement also brought her into Nathaniel's view fully. More, it brought him amazement.

"Vivian Lynnfield!" he murmured.

Barrington Oakes drew her roughly to one side. She was one born to a rank of life where deference is shown to her sex, yet Oakes exhibited the roughness one would use to an inferior.

The detective was greatly surprised, but he did not long allow this to keep him unobservant. Quickly he noticed that she was clad in traveling costume, and carried a large bag, as if off on a journey. He did not understand this, but the fact that Oakes had met her did not lead him into the error of supposing they were to go together.

The man had been rough and harsh with her, and she had been both surprised and alarmed to see him.

Opportunity did not offer for the pair to go far away from the crowd without leaving the ferry-house, but the crowd, waiting with impatient observation of the rain, afforded a sort of screen to them—where so many were gathered a couple made but little show.

Barrington still kept his hold on her arm, and he had begun to speak rapidly. She listened, but not with pleasure, it seemed. She looked worried and frightened, and several times she vainly tried to release her arm.

Nathaniel pressed as closely to them as was prudent. A part of their conversation became audible to him.

"You fool!" he heard, from Oakes, "what will you try to do next?"

"Kill myself, perhaps!" swiftly replied Vivian.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SECRET POWER.

It was an ominous threat, and all the more impressive in Nathaniel's sight because it did not seem to be for mere show. Vivian appeared to be in earnest.

Barrington Oakes was not impressed in a like way, or else he cared nothing for the words.

"When will you do it?" he sneered.

"Now, maybe," Vivian desperately answered.

"It would be very sensational, but you had better defer it. Turn your face toward New York!" ordered Oakes, without any ceremony.

"I am not going to do it."

"Indeed? Where will you go?"

"I don't know—anywhere, so long as I get out of sight and sound of those who know me."

"I suspected your design, and you will see how it worked. A ticket privately bought on the D. L. & W. at this juncture is suggestive. If you think you are going to run away you are mistaken!"

"Are you my master?" demanded the girl, with a brief show of spirit.

"I am!" declared Barrington Oakes, coolly.

She looked at him without denying the assertion. Then her eyes filled with tears.

"Have you no mercy?" she asked, tremulously.

"None for you."

"Mercy!" she repeated, bitterly; "you do not know what the word means!"

"I am not on trial, and we need not discuss the possibility. All I have to say now is that you are not going to carry out this mad purpose of yours. You will return to New York with me. Think what a sensation it would cause if you were to flee as you have childishly planned."

"Better that than the purgatory you have made of my life!"

"Oh! is that the way you look at it? Well, if you are not satisfied it is your own fault. You have acted like a child. Come back to New York."

"I am not going."

Oakes smiled tantalizingly.

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes."

"Then I will call a policeman and have you arrested!"

"Arrested?" she echoed, frightened. "I have done nothing."

"I will tell them you have gone crazy, and it will be about right. Reflect! At present nobody knows of your mad resolution to run away but myself. If you persist I shall make it all public. Do you want the publicity? Do you want to be called upon to explain?"

Vivian's head fell low.

Oakes looked toward the slip.

"Another boat is coming in. We will take it for New York."

He had no reply.

The moving of the crowd shut Nathaniel off from hearing more at that juncture, and he did not press forward. He had become very desirous of being unseen, and he was content to keep back rather than encounter Oakes's sharp eyes.

The in-coming passengers left the boat, and then Barrington, still keeping hold of Vivian's arm, forced her forward toward the slip. She resisted at first, but her strength

was nothing compared with his, and she finally yielded. They were the first to pass upon the boat.

Nathaniel still followed. They had taken the way to the ladies' cabin, and he selected the other. It would not do to seek to listen while they were on board, for discovery was almost sure to result; so he planned to ignore them until the New York shore side was reached.

He went out in front, and stood leaning on the rail.

Not until the boat was fully out of the slip did he take any notice of his neighbors. When he did so he was surprised to see that Barrington and Vivian were also out in front.

They were by the opposite rail, and Vivian was leaning out over the water. Nathaniel experienced a feeling of uneasiness. She was in a desperate mood, and a slight effort would enable her to cast herself into the stream. Would she take such a mad step?

He was glad to see that Oakes kept close to her—so close that, if he wished to prevent a casualty, he could do so easily and readily.

The detective was not a little puzzled by the situation. What was the secret between the two, and what Oakes's hold on the daughter of rich Walton Lynnfield?

He remembered the scene in the Lynnfield parlor that had impressed him as peculiar.

Vivian had been summoned to see if the handkerchief was hers. She had hesitated and looked at Oakes. The latter had made a secret gesture, whereupon she asserted that the article was not hers. Then Oakes claimed that she was faint—though nobody else had noticed it—and had led her to the curtained window. He talked earnestly with her there, and when they returned she had declared that the handkerchief was hers.

Looked at in the light of following events, it seemed that both of her statements had been governed by her desire to conform her replies to Oakes's wishes.

Several things had become apparent to the detective. Oakes had some mysterious hold upon the girl and was using it with relentless and brutal force; she feared him, and was so miserable that she wished to flee from the city, and he was playing a game which could not then be fathomed.

Was it connected with the crimes at Lynnfield's?

"Oakes is a brute; that much is sure. He is Count Altamonte's friend. If we assume that he is not on the square in regard to the previous mysteries of the Lynnfield house, we must assume, also, that he has Altamonte as partner in evil-doing, or else that he is playing Altamonte false. I must sound the count, and learn just how much he places reliance in this dark-faced friend of his. He must have thought well of him to bring him from the Continent as one of the guards of the diamonds."

The New York shore was reached.

Oakes called a cab, and he and Vivian entered. They were driven away. Nathaniel engaged a second cab and followed.

The pursuit took him within one block of Walton Lynnfield's house. There the foremost carriage paused, Oakes and Vivian alighted and resumed their journey on foot. The detective followed, and soon saw them enter the house. The chase was over, and there was nothing more to see that night.

Nathaniel went home and swallowed a hasty supper. He could not have told what he ate; his mind was busy.

"What does this new departure signify?" was the question which perplexed him. "If I learn the secret between Vivian and Barrington Oakes, shall I get light on other mysteries?"

Nathaniel had not forgotten that he had an engagement with Captain Sam Dodds, and when supper was eaten he took an Elevated train and made his way to South street. When he neared the pier he found the Tripping Mary still in the dock, and Nibsy King came out of the shadow of Patsy Greene's shanty.

"Here we are ag'in, boss," cheerfully observed the youth.

"Any news?"

"Not a bit."

"No commotion around the Tripping Mary?"

"No. A good many o' the sailors hev gone ashore, but I seen the captain on deck a few minutes ago. He seemed ter be lookin' fer somebody ter come."

"Myself, probably. Nibsy, here is a trifle for keeping watch," and he put a bank-note into the boy's hand.

"Boss, you are a peach!" declared Nibsy. "I'll go an' hev a feed o' fish-balls out o' this richness. Shall you want me more?"

"Probably not."

"Anyhow, I'll drift back when I've got them fish-balls. You may want a kid of my latitude o' waist."

"So I may. Come, by all means."

"I'm your gazelle!"

Nibsy hastened off, and Nathaniel bent his steps toward the Tripping Mary. Captain Dodds was on deck, and he gave his guest a hearty welcome.

"Glad to see ye, boy; glad ter see ye. Maybe you noticed I looked at you kinder sharp as you come up. Fact is, there has been some men keepin' a weather eye onter the Trippin' Mary in a way I don't like."

"Who are they?"

"Just what I don't know. They may be all right, or they may be river thieves who think they can out-general a man from Belfast, Maine; or they may be some o' the gang that sent me ter sea on a Tom-fool's errand."

"Do you think that, captain?"

"There are times when a man may as wal not think, an' this is one o' them. I don't know who is peepin' at the Trippin' Mary, but ef the land-lubber thinks he kin come on board late o' night an' work any lawless scheme he will reckon wrong. Yes, an' I'll blow him ter thunder, by mighty!"

"So you really have been spied upon?"

"Can't tell, but that is my theory. We've been watched queer from shore. Never mind; old Sam Dodds is good fer the whole gang o' them. Come down below, lad, an' we'll leave the deck ter care fer itself. All the boys are on shore leave."

"All?"

"Yes."

"If you are watched by suspicious characters, isn't that rash?"

"I guess not. Cowards an' thieves root up the barnyard by night, an' this is early evenin'. Come down, lad."

Nathaniel said no more, but followed his host. Captain Sam had the cabin well lighted, and everything looked cheerful. Pipes and cigars were on the table, and the old salt evidently intended to play the host well. He was all over the fit of bad temper in which Nathaniel had first found him, but he was not forgetful of the subject which had enraged him.

"Set down; set down!" he directed. "Take that chair; it is one that my honeysuckle o' the deep mystery once set in."

"No clue to her yet, captain?"

"Not a hair."

"After playing you false, would they not be likely to look out for your return?"

"Just my notion, an' that is why I suspected the fellers who was spyin' on the schooner this evenin'."

"Look out for them. You have rough neighbors around here. I would not trust South street at any time, and it is risky to you now."

"It'll be risky ter them, by thunder! ef they mousey around here. They may beat old Sam Dodds at tricks, but they can't no other way. Say, I'll git square ef I hev ter lay in this dock until next year. Yes, by gum! I'll stay here till I get ter be a Rip Van Winkle!"

And Captain Sam brought his fist down heavily on the table.

"They or me has got ter git licked bad!" he added.

CHAPTER XX.

TROUBLE ON THE TRIPPING MARY.

NATHANIEL found the skipper in just the right mood, so he proceeded to business.

"You say you would know your mysterious passenger?" he inquired.

"So I did say, an' so I'll know her. Yes, siree!" declared Captain Sam.

"I want you to call on a certain woman with me."

"Call on a woman? Not unless you think she's my honeysuckle—"

"I suspect she may be."

"Heave ahead, then!" and the captain started up.

"Not to-night; it can't be done. Tomorrow will have to do."

"Sorry! I'd like ter walk up ter her this blessed minute, but you know best. Yes, I'll call on her, an' you can bet yer boots I'll know her ef she's my honeysuckle. But why do you think you know of her?"

It was hard to answer the question satisfactorily without telling too much, but the detective managed to get around it and still leave the skipper in good humor.

During the next hour they sat and smoked and talked. Nathaniel wanted the smallest particulars concerning the girl passenger who had come and gone so mysteriously, and Captain Sam was not averse to telling all he could. The ground was pretty well worked over when the detective announced that he must go.

"Don't forget the appointment for tomorrow," requested Nathaniel.

"Not much."

They passed up to the deck. The scene had not changed visibly. Schooner and pier were dark, and South street looked dim and depressing in the mantle of a fog which had come up from the bay.

"Kinder pokerish," remarked the captain.

"I shall be glad when the crew gets back, an' thet won't be long now. I limited their shore leave, an' they are liable ter show up at any time."

"Didn't I hear somebody stirring over yonder by the mainmast?"

"I reckon it was my dog Peter. He's always around the deck. He plays he is the watch, I guess."

Captain Dodds thrust his hands into his pockets and was at ease. He was still talkative, and he called Nathaniel's attention to a brigantine which lay close at hand. He had something to say about her, and he was saying it when the peculiar sound again caught the detective's attention.

He turned quickly.

He saw a tall man close beside him.

"Smash them!" exclaimed a voice on the other side.

There was the sound of a blow, and Captain Dodds tumbled over against Nathaniel. The mishap saved the detective from some thing worse. The tall man had made a forward plunge, and the detective felt a knife graze his arm.

The impetus of the would-be assassin sent him on past Nathaniel, and the latter did not lose the opportunity. With a skillful blow he knocked the unknown off from his feet.

"Look out!" cried the detective.

Captain Dodds seemed to be bewildered, and when several men leaped forward together, Nathaniel had to meet them alone.

There was enough light so that he could see something of his assailants, and he noticed that they were roughly-dressed fellows of muscular form—true water-front toughs, he thought.

He had received due schooling in the art of self-defense, and he did not forget his lessons now. He met them unwaveringly, and gave blow for blow. He had a revolver in his pocket, but he did not wish to use it unless the enemy resorted to similar tactics.

Captain Sam was not the man to long remain out of a fight, and he rallied and took his place by Nathaniel's side.

"Down with the land-lubbers!" he roared. "Break them inter bits! Knock them off the deck!"

It was well planned, but the enemy knew how to hold their own. It was done, and the liveliest fight of a year's experience was seen by the skipper.

Despite the odds the two men stood up bravely, and then there was a diversion. A new, lithe form leaped to the deck.

"This way!" cried its owner. "Come on, cops!"

Straight at the foe sprung the speaker, and a man who was about to do Captain Dodds serious injury was knocked a yard away by a blow in the stomach.

"Here come the police!"

So persisted the new arrival, and the cry was one which the pier toughs did not receive with composure. One of their num-

ber turned and ran ingloriously, and it was the signal for a general rout. Like a flock of sheep they went bounding to the pier, and then away toward the street.

A hearty laugh followed them.

"Say, fellers, didn't I work that rich!"

"Nibsy King!" exclaimed Nathaniel.

"Et ain't nobody else. I'm him, an' all the cops there is in this section. Jest played a game on them, an' they run like deers after a bear. Great fightin' men, they be! Got scared over a bluff."

Captain Sam shook himself into shape.

"Where are the cattle?" he demanded, fiercely.

"Gone ter grass!" laughed Nibsy.

"Beat them out, hev we?"

"Wal, I should hullo!"

"Them was river pirates. No, I ain't so sure o' that. It wouldn't surprise me a bit ef they was a part o' the gang my honeysuckle belonged ter."

Nathaniel was again fully himself.

"Nibsy, do you know who they were?" he inquired.

"How about Con an' Aleck?"

"Was it those fellows?"

"Et wasn't nobody else—they an' their heelers."

"Which were they after here?"

"That I don't know."

"How do you know it was them?"

"I seen Con gather the lost sheep an' lead them here: that's how I know."

"Proof enough."

"I don't know the men you speak of," put in the captain, "but I be ready to go out an' lick them again ef you know where to find them."

"Having done well, we can afford to let it rest," replied Nathaniel. "Beyond question they were river-thieves. Don't you agree with me, Nibsy?"

The detective touched his young friend secretly, and Nibsy was quick to agree with him.

"Maybe," admitted Captain Sam, slowly; "but I thought it was my honeysuckle's gang come ter do me up."

"Be that as it may, you want to use unceasing vigilance in the matter," cautioned Nathaniel. "Don't be alone on the schooner again, and don't miss having a watch on deck all the while at night."

"You are just about right, an' I'll do it."

The detective did not go away until he had repeated the warning again, and when, after some of the crew returned, Nathaniel and Nibsy did go, it was with the feeling that the old sailor had been duly cautioned.

Once more on South street, the detective turned upon his ally.

"Nibsy, is there more to tell about this?"

"Boss, it is a queer thing."

"What?"

"Con led that attack, but he didn't form it alone. I had just finished my fish-balls an' started back when I see somethin' funny. Do you know a gay young gazelle o' the male persuasion, about twenty-five years old, an' who dresses right pert, like he wished he was one o' the Four Hundred; an' is almost a dandy in his rig?—an' who has yeller hair an' a smooth face, but fer a mustache which makes him look like he poulticed it ter make et git out inter public?"

"I don't know," replied Nathaniel, not with perfect candor. "What about him?"

"Him an' Con met on the street."

"And then?"

"Con hustled among his gang an' come here ter do you up."

"Do you infer that the attack was the result of the conference between the two men?"

"Looks like it."

"Where did the yellow-haired man come from?"

"Give et up."

"Where did he go?"

"Back the same way he come. Now, I tell you it looks queer ter me that a swell like him should have biz with Con, especially jest before the attack on the schooner."

The detective did not combat the idea. He had more reason to think so than Nibsy had, and the yellow-haired man interested him a good deal. He would have given considerable to know whether the attack had been intended for himself or the captain, but he was inclined to believe with Dodds that he was marked by the friends of

the young woman he called his "honeysuckle."

"Nibsy," he added, presently, "do you want the job of still keeping your eyes open in this vicinity, and especially where Con is concerned?"

"You bet I do, boss!" cried the youth.

"Do so, then, and I will pay you well for discoveries."

CHAPTER XXI.

HEARD FROM BEHIND THE CURTAINS.

THE following morning Nathaniel Cooledge went over to Lynnfield's house. The servant who opened the door observed:

"I think Mr. Lynnfield is occupied now with his toilet, but if you will wait above in the north room you will be free from casual callers, and I will send him to you as soon as he is at liberty."

"Do so, if you please."

The detective went up and to the room mentioned. He had been there before; it was the same where the jewels had last been seen. The place awakened many memories, and Nathaniel looked around with interest.

"Here," he thought, "is exactly where the table then stood. Here is where I stood when I looked at them. Yonder hangs the picture to which Barrington Oakes called my attention, and thereby took my eyes off from the jewels at the moment when they ought most to have been on them. The robbery was done while I was thus occupied, and Oakes was bidding us all gaze on the picture—"

Nathaniel stopped short.

Many times before he had gone over the scene as he understood it, and always with the same explanation. Now, however, he was more impressed than before.

"Oakes made us all look at the picture!" he murmured.

Another pause.

"Was it accident or design?"

With his suspicions setting in against the tall man it began to seem very significant. If a dexterous thief wished for a clear coast, no plan could have been more effective.

"Still," thought Nathaniel, "it cannot be that the count would have brought Oakes with him from the Continent unless he considered his faithfulness assured. If Oakes has gone wrong a trusted servant has been the betrayer. No man is above suspicion, and I will look to Mr. Barrington Oakes."

There was a stir in the next room. Only hanging curtains separated it from the room the detective was in.

"Possibly it is somebody I wish to see," he thought. "I will look."

He went quietly to the curtains, pulled them a trifle apart and looked. Immediately he dropped them again. He had seen Vivian Lynnfield sitting in a chair, her head pillowed on her arms and her whole attitude that of deep dejection.

He had no wish to spy upon her, and he was about to get well away from the connecting point when he heard a rap at some point. Before he could place it fully, footsteps sounded in the other room and a voice exclaimed:

"Vivian, I have come to bid you good-by!"

There was no reply, and curiosity got the better of delicacy. Once more Nathaniel pushed the curtains aside.

Vivian had risen and was facing Robert Houston.

Both of the young people were deeply agitated, it seemed, and the silence continued unbroken. Nathaniel could well believe the moment was a painful one to both. Presently a look of bitterness came to Robert's face and he added in a like vein:

"I see you do not care whether I go or not."

Vivian aroused, and she vehemently exclaimed:

"I do care; it is breaking my heart!"

"Then keep me here."

"How can I?"

"Recall your refusal to marry me."

"Alas! I cannot."

"Cannot!" was the bitter retort. "You mean you do not want to."

"Oh, Robert!"

"I am tired of this idle talk," asserted Houston. "You will not give any reason for your extraordinary conduct, and I won't endure it any longer. I have come to bid you good-by."

"Do not go!" she implored.

"I am going, and I shall not return. You refuse to marry me. So be it. Good-by!"

He half held out his hand, and then pulled it back suddenly.

"No," he said, "I will not do it. Why should I touch the hand of one to whom I am so distasteful?"

There was a light cough by the hall door. Nathaniel Cooledge's strayed gaze in that direction and he saw Barrington Oakes. The tall man advanced with a slow step and unmoved face. He surveyed his companions with the look of power so natural to him.

"Young people," he quietly spoke, "do not be hasty about this."

Houston turned his back in disdain.

"I am older than you," pursued Oakes, regardless of the fact that he might have been a brother, as far as age went. "I am, possibly, more experienced in the ways of the world. Oblige me by listening to me."

Placid and mild was the voice of this philosopher, but Nathaniel noticed that he bent a keen, perhaps a threatening gaze upon Vivian. For a peacemaker he surely scowled too blackly upon her. Robert's back being turned, he saw nothing of it.

"Young blood is hot," Barrington pursued, "and young heads are not always wise. Let me say that trifling things should not mar the happiness of a lifetime. We should not let signs and omens and trifles influence us too much. So much for Miss Lynnfield. Mr. Houston, possibly you and I have no nerves. That does not signify that others are as well gifted with the iron of nature."

Barrington Oakes threw his commanding head a little further back and surveyed his companions critically.

"I wish you two to marry!" he added, quietly.

Robert made a gesture of sullen rebellion.

"I wish it!" pursued Mr. Oakes, slower than ever.

He put out his hand and touched Vivian. His lips framed one word:

"Obey!"

The unspoken word did not reach Houston.

"I have given this much thought," pursued the peacemaker, aloud. "It seems to me more than well that you two should marry; it seems to be something you must do. I trust I am understood."

As an accompaniment to the last words he bent a dark look upon Vivian. There was a threat and a command in that look.

"I trust this," continued Barrington, mildly, "because I feel so deeply on the subject. I want, moreover, to be the means of bringing about a reconciliation between you. Peace is a dove which we should welcome to our hearts. Do not reject it from yours. This is world-wise, practical advice. Listen to it! I want peace between you. Miss Lynnfield, consider your situation; consider that of our friend here. Do not let trifles keep you apart. You desire a reconciliation I am sure. So do I. I want you to marry Mr. Houston within the week. Will you do it?"

Vivian was gazing at the speaker like one who is fascinated by the baleful power of a rattlesnake. She heard his every word, but seemed like one dreaming.

"I wish you two to marry!" repeated Oakes, with decision. "Miss Vivian, speak! Do you still love this man?"

Her reply came in a whisper:

"Yes."

"Have you changed your mind?"

"Yes,"—again the whisper.

"I have convinced you by logic?"

"Yes."

"Good! I will leave you two alone. Do not forget what I have said"—mild the words, but a fierce glare was bent on hapless Vivian—"I wish this marriage to take place."

Barrington Oakes crossed over to Houston and took him gently by the arm.

"Friend, do you reject the happiness offered you?"

"No, no!" cried Robert, vehemently. "I shall be only too glad to have it so. Vivian, come to me, come to me!"

CHAPTER XXII.

NATHANIEL GETS NEWS.

ROBERT did not wait to have his request complied with. He was excited greatly, and he turned and hastened toward Vivian with long steps.

Barrington Oakes smiled coolly.

"I will leave you. Work out your happiness together; I wish it to be so!"

Bending a last gaze upon Vivian the speaker turned to the door and passed out of the room to the hall.

Robert clasped Vivian in his arms.

Nathaniel allowed the curtains to fall.

The detective had rarely seen a scene which impressed him more. The by-play of which Houston had been wholly ignorant had been impressive, and it told of the strong mind with which Barrington Oakes was gifted not less than it told of his power over Vivian Lynnfield. He had won the point, not by logic, but by working on the fears of the girl. He had commanded her to obey him, and she had not dared to refuse.

"Surpassingly strong must be his hold on her," thought the detective. "There is nothing of the hypnotic sort about it—it is solely the force of fear within her mind. She dared not refuse him. I do not believe she is now unwilling to obey, yet the power of Barrington Oakes is not less strikingly manifested. It is remarkable. What hold can he have to thus sway her?"

Nathaniel walked to the center of the room. He had no disposition to spy upon the lovers, so he sat down and waited and considered the new evidence of Barrington Oakes's power. The man began to take strong hold upon Nathaniel.

Presently Lynnfield put in an appearance accompanied by the count. The detective was glad to see them together, for he had something to show them when the time was ripe.

The three proceeded to discuss the situation. Both Lynnfield and Altamonte were inclined to complain of the tardiness of the police. As far as the two men had learned there had been no progress made in clearing up the mysteries of the case.

The murder of Thomas Smith was unsolved, and they could not learn that the officers had obtained any information as to suspicious characters seen around the block the night of the tragedy.

In brief, the investigation did not appear to have advanced at all.

Nothing was said which indicated blame of the detective, but Nathaniel felt that such blame was implied. If the precinct police deserved censure in his present companions' eyes, so must he deserve it, it seemed.

Nathaniel did not let this conversation ruffle his temper, and, in due time, he proceeded to business.

"Count," he began, "you recognized the ear-ring which came from the Jersey freight-yard, didn't you?"

"Certainly, monsieur."

"Could you identify all of the jewels that were in the casket before the robbery?"

"Every one of them!"

"Are you sure? There are many jewels in the world, and they must bear a strong resemblance. The stones, themselves, must be generally alike, and so must the settings. The lost jewels were many in number. Are you sure you can identify all?"

The count had been waiting impatiently to speak.

"*Mon Dieu*, yes!" cried he; "I should as soon think of forgetting my own name as these. Have they not been in my family ever since the Empress Josephine—hapless queen!—gave them to us? Forget them? Never! Identify them? Yes, though I saw them in the wilds of Africa!"

"How about this?"

Quickly and quietly Nathaniel laid a ring before the Frenchman. The latter's eyes at once blazed with excitement.

"Another!" he cried. "*Mon Dieu*! another!"

He snatched the ring and clasped it close with loving care of a mother caressing her

child. He was, however, more like a child in one way—his headlong delight.

"Is it really one of the lot?" pursued Nathaniel, calmly.

"Yes, yes; where did you get it?"

"That I am not prepared to tell just yet. I hope to do so soon."

"From the freight-yard?" inquired Lynnfield.

"No."

"A pawn-shop?"

"You shall know in good time. To be too precipitate in this matter would be to damage our own case. If this ring is of the collection—"

"It is!" cried the count.

"Then I have a valuable clue."

"Tell it to us, monsieur—"

"I will, in good time. Pray let me manage this matter discreetly. If you are as sure as you say, I know something of how to proceed. This ring I borrowed. For the present I wish to return it whence it came."

"Return it?" echoed Altamonte, blankly.

"Yes."

"But, it is ours."

"So it shall continue to be, but I gave a promise when I took it here. Let me carry out the pledge; you shall have it in due time."

"I advise you to comply, count," remarked Lynnfield.

The Frenchman sighed deeply, but yielded the point, and Nathaniel returned the gem to his pocket. It was the same ring which had been in Nibsy King's possession; it was that ring given Nibsy by the Lady of Diamonds.

The detective looked around carefully, but quietly. He had more to say, and he wished to make sure of privacy. Making a pretense of desiring to survey the back-yards, he went to the rear window, and thus drew his companions to that point. Thus, after a little delay, he had all seated so close to the wall that he felt sure a listener could not catch much of what was said.

He opened up conversation anew, and finally broached what was in his mind, doing it without sign of special interest.

"When you came from the Continent, count, you brought with you fellow guards for the diamonds. How much did they know of the jewels?"

"Practically nothing."

"Do you trust them fully?"

"I did."

"You did? You use the past tense. Do you mean that you have ceased to trust them?"

"Not at all. They were my best and most devoted servants, but I said I 'did' trust them in an off-hand way, on account of all having returned to the Continent long ago."

Surprise was pictured on Nathaniel's face.

"They have returned?" he repeated.

"Yes, monsieur."

"But some remain."

"Not one. All took the first steamer home."

"How about Barrington Oakes?"

It was Altamonte's turn to be surprised.

"Did you think he was one of my guards?"

"So you told me—did you not?"

"Impossible! I never saw Mr. Oakes until I came to New York a fortnight ago."

"But, he has always been represented to me as your friend!" exclaimed the detective.

"So he is, but not an old friend. The friendship was begun here, and it is sincere; because I recognize the fact that he is one of Nature's noblemen."

Nathaniel was in darkness, but he struggled toward the light.

"Then, I assume that he is an old friend of Mr. Lynnfield's?"

"I had a son once," explained Lynnfield, with a sigh. "He left our country, entered the English army in Africa and died there. One of his associates was Barrington Oakes. It was Mr. Oakes who wrote me of my son's death when the cruel fever overtook my boy. Thus, we grew to know of Barrington without seeing him, and he and I wrote often, even after Oakes left the army. A few weeks ago he mentioned coming to America, and I answered and invited him to be my guest. He came a month before the count's arrival, and became a member of my household as a guest, for the time being."

"I am sure he was introduced, not as your friend, but as the count's. True, it was Altamonte, himself, who did the introducing, but the idea was impressed on my mind by all that he was, first, last and all the time, the count's friend. I never heard of his being your friend."

"That was because of the strong liking he and Altamonte took for each other. But," added Lynnfield, "what has this to do with our case?"

Nathaniel smiled lightly.

"Nothing, of course. We have wandered far from our subject, have we not? You see, the notion was in my head that Oakes was, not a servitor, of course, but a friend, old and fast, of the count. In brief, I thought he had come with Altamonte from France."

"Not at all," replied Altamonte. "As I said before, I've known him only a fortnight."

"An odd mistake, but not of a moment. Of course it does not matter how it is. Count, you should have had a regiment of soldiers to guard the jewels!"

Nathaniel laughed as he spoke, and both his companions joined in the supposed merriment. No more was said of Mr. Oakes. There was, however, one member of the party who did a good deal of thinking.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JOHN BERWICK MAKES A SUGGESTION.

DURING the minutes immediately following Nathaniel found it hard to keep up a conversation, but he did it well, and did not allow the subject matter to again become Barrington Oakes. To accomplish this end he was singularly flippant for a time, and only grew grave again when he felt that it was safe.

Nathaniel felt that he had made an important discovery.

From the time when he first entered the house the idea had been by accident or design—perhaps a good deal of both—drummed into his head that Barrington Oakes was a personal friend of the count's, and of nobody else. Thus, it was not strange that he inferred that Oakes had crossed the ocean with Altamonte as a guard for the jewels.

Laboring under this error he had always omitted Mr. Oakes from the list of persons who could err seriously.

Now, it was different. He had been told that not one of the party ever had seen Oakes except within the past month.

The tall man immediately took new position in the detective's mind.

Presently the detective asked leave to look around the house and back-yard without any hindrance, and his companions took the hint and left him alone. He surveyed the yard more closely than ever before, and also talked with the servants.

If he made discoveries he did not tell any one what they were.

When he returned to the upper floor he met John Berwick. The blonde young man smiled cordially.

"Any news, Cooledge?" he asked.

"Not a bit."

Mr. Berwick looked around him sharply and then lowered his voice.

"I want to see you in my room!" Then he raised the voice again and lightly added: "Old man, I have some excellent cigars upstairs. If you are as tired as you look it will do you good to rest for half an hour. Come up and smoke with me!"

Nathaniel was not allowing anything to pass by him, and the mysterious air of the speaker was quite enough to gain the desired audience. The detective made a reply as diplomatic as was the invitation, and then followed Berwick.

It was to a room on the third floor, and there John placed a chair for his guest.

"Make yourself comfortable, Cooledge," he directed. "I have a couple of 'roofers' here which will help you out a bit if they are not too bad. Try one!"

He extended a cigar, and both lighted up and began to smoke.

"How does it go, old man?" asked Berwick.

"It is decidedly a fine cigar."

"Glad you like it. I fancy I can select a tolerable weed when I set out to do it. I

began to smoke early—under six years, by the way—and the numerous lickings I got for my evil tastes must have developed scientific appreciation of tobacco. I like the stuff, too."

Mr. Berwick sat down, elevated his feet in a second chair and blew a wreath of smoke toward the ceiling. He had a graceful, happy-go-lucky way of doing things which was quite fascinating, and it occurred to Nathaniel that this young man would be a breaker of hearts if he wished to be.

"Do you prefer a 'domestic' or Havana?" added Berwick.

"Either suits me."

"A reasonable conclusion, for I am told that most of our so called imported tobacco is, really, grown in the Connecticut valley. I rather fancy a pipe at times, and have a weakness for Turkish tobacco."

"It is too strong for me."

"It is devilish muscular!" agreed Mr. Berwick.

He blew out another scientific wreath, and then suddenly changed the subject.

"Say, Cooledge, did the count give you a song-and-dance, to-day?"

"In what way?"

"Did he give you any ghost-stories?—any fairy tales?"

"Why should he do that?"

"Frankly, do you take a hundred per cent stock in His Nibs?"

"Why should I do otherwise?"

"Do you know, I can't get rid of the notion that Old Monte Carlo is playing us with a reel and a long line."

"I am wholly in the dark as to your meaning. If I get the first clue, you distrust him. Why?"

Berwick lowered his legs and his voice at the same time.

"How in hades did those jewels walk off so queer?"

"Just what I would like to know."

"It may be all right, but fire usually makes smoke and leaves ashes. There are none in this case. Were the jewels really carried out of the house?"

"Do you think they were not?"

"If they went, where are the ashes? Now, see here, Cooledge: I am not a detective—I dare say I should be a dunce at the biz—and I have nothing to gain or lose out of all this, but certain things occur to me as a man who tries to use common sense. If there was a robbery, where are the ashes? Is old Monte Carlo giving us a song-and-dance? In brief, has he not the jewels now?"

Nathaniel regarded his companion closely, but he made little out of it. Berwick seemed devoted to his cigar, and incidentally interested in the diamond case.

"You will have to explain," replied the detective. "I do not understand you."

"I'll try to get my grip on the cable. As I have said, fire leaves ashes. The jewels seem to have gone out of sight in a ridiculously easy, yet a remarkably mysterious way. There should be some trace; there is none. I may be all wrong, but I mistrust the count. Suppose His Nibs had been bluffing? Suppose he never intended to give away the diamonds? Suppose he had a string tied to them, invisible to all but Monsieur Altamonte, and then when he had shown the sparklers he pulled in the string?"

"If he did that, what do you make him out?"

"A man who had better stay in this country and work the green goods racket!"

"Altamonte is a man of wealth, social position, and, I am told, unimpeachable honor. Why should he play such a trick?"

"It would be scurvy, I admit."

"Where is your proof to that effect?"

"I haven't a grain. Perhaps," added Berwick, slowly, "I ought not to have mentioned it at all; but the idea got into my head and I felt that I ought to ease my mind. If this foreigner is playing us for suckers he ought to be tripped up. Maybe he isn't; maybe I wrong him greatly. If I do I am sorry. Remember, Cooledge, I only give this to you as a vague notion. Don't let me prejudice you against the count. Hang it all! I am not a detective; I can't detect the key-hole after a night at the club!"

He laughed good-humoredly, and then fixed a keen gaze on the end of Nathaniel's cigar.

"That don't show up a white ash," he complained. "Here, Cooledge, toss that 'roofer' away and try this. It is a genuine Havana, I am sure. Yours burns more like a counterfeit—it looks like a Sumatra wrapper."

Nathaniel's cigar was a good one, and he so informed his host. He kept it and smoked it up in Berwick's room. Berwick's assertion that he had mentioned the possibility of the count being crooked only on vague suspicion seemed to settle that, and the subject was soon dropped.

When the cigars were exhausted they went down-stairs. Mr. Lynnfield was encountered, and while Nathaniel paused to speak with him Berwick wandered away.

The detective's business at the house was done for the time, and he soon took his way home. There, as he expected, he found Horace Black.

"You have news, I see," remarked Cooledge.

"Only a trifle. I have succeeded in hunting up the dressmaker who made the gown worn by the female reporter at the wedding."

"Good! Was it much labor?"

"It required some time, since there was so little clue, but it is done."

"Well?"

"I have found the woman who made the dress, I repeat. There can be no doubt of that. More, she gives color to previous suspicions. The person for whom she made it gave the name of Ella Conness; but that is trivial, of course; the dress is positively identified, I think."

"Where did she send it?"

"Nowhere. The owner came for it, accompanied by a boy, who carried the parcel away."

"Humph!"

"To give it in full, this so-called Ella Conness came and ordered the dress made in a hurry. There could be no delay; it had to be made quickly. More, it had to be made with a pocket."

"Ah!"

"Few women except of the common sort have pockets in any kind of dresses, and least of all in a dress intended for ball or wedding wear. As the dressmaker explained to me a pocket spoils the 'set' of the dress. This seems frivolous to poor, feeble male minds; but so the dressmakers say. So this particular dressmaker said to Miss Ella Conness; but she talked in vain. The dress had to be made with a pocket, and it was made thus. Why?"

"To furnish a place to secrete the jewels when they had been stolen!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A WELL-ARMED OPPONENT.

MR. BLACK nodded quickly.

"If your theory is wrong, then I am equally caught in the web. I believe the pocket was to hide the diamonds in."

"Of course it was," replied Nathaniel; "and you will remember that when the so-called Lady of the Diamonds dazzled Nibsy King and Andy Hicks by revealing her wealth of jewels, she pulled the supply of brilliants out of a pocket in a dress they describe as a ball-dress."

"The rings given to these South street men—"

"One of them has to-day been identified as a part of the Altamonte collection."

"Then we are surely on the trail."

"One word more. We do not know where Ella Conness lived, and we probably do not know her name. How did she look?"

Black repeated the description as he had received it from the dressmaker. When it was done Nathaniel had to admit, mentally, that it fitted Adrienne Everley exactly.

When Mr. Black had finished fully he went away. Nathaniel took a car and went downtown. He first went to Nibsy King and returned the ring; then he walked over to the pier and found Captain Sam Dodds. He was told that nothing new and startling had happened around the Tripping Mary, and the old salt was in high humor.

"Going ter see my honeysuckle, be we?" he asked.

"We go to see if a certain woman is the same as the one you call your honeysuckle."

"You take a long way of sayin' it. If it

proves ter be her, I shall not take many words ter make myself understood, by thunder!"

Captain Dodds nodded his bushy head with emphasis, and Nathaniel felt compelled to caution him against violence, which he did in due form. They then set out on the journey.

It took them to the house where Adrienne Everley lived. On arriving there Nathaniel pulled the bell and a servant soon appeared.

"Is Miss Everley in?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"We wish to see her."

"Is it professional business?"

"Yes."

"You can go right up, sir. Third floor, front."

They went, and entered the room where Nathaniel had before seen the female reporter. She was now there, seated at a desk, and writing with her usual persistence. She turned around, but in such a way that, at first, her face was not visible fully to Captain Dodds. She recognized Nathaniel.

"Oh! is it you?" she coldly spoke.

"Yes, Miss Everley. I have brought you another caller."

"It is doubtful kindness," replied the girl, with an air of weariness. "I don't like the sort you bring."

She turned fully.

Captain Dodds leaped to his feet.

"That's her; that's my honeysuckle!" he exclaimed.

Miss Everley had patiently born insinuations and charges, but she now manifested plain indignation. One word used by the mariner had not been agreeable to her. She rose and faced him with sparkling eyes.

"Is this man intoxicated?" she demanded.

"No more than I was the night you come on board the Trippin' Mary," pointedly answered the captain.

"Perhaps you understand; I do not."

"Oh! don't ye?"

"I do not."

"Never was on South street; never took passage on the Schooner Trippin' Mary; never skipped from the cabin without payin' yer bill; never see me, did you?"

"Never!"

"Good, good! I like a square liar, by gosh!"

"Captain, be calm!" cautioned the detective. "We are with a lady and must govern ourselves accordingly. Miss Everley, this gentleman is captain of the schooner Tripping Mary, and he claims you were once a passenger thereon. If he is mistaken we shall be glad to have you prove it."

"Another thing you want me to prove?" sarcastically retorted the reporter. "Your calm assurance is remarkable. Presently you will call in with a new companion and ask me to prove the world is made of green cheese. It never occurs to you that the burden of proof should lie with you. No! All you do is to pick up some tramp on the street, run in here and ask me to prove that something or other is so, or isn't so. Do you want me to prove that Jupiter is inhabited? Any little thing like that is nothing in your opinion—if you can get somebody else to prove it!"

Nathaniel was an old campaigner, but this sarcastic young woman had found the weak spot in his armor. It did look as if she had made out a strong case. The detective flushed deeply, and then sat silent.

"Anyhow," persisted the mariner, "you are the gal who hired the Trippin' Mary."

"What! with you on board!" cried Adrienne. "My dear sir, nobody would sail in the same craft with you unless it was somebody who did it in preference to going to State's Prison for life!"

"What's that?" gasped the indignant captain.

"Water everywhere, and not a drop for a bath!" murmured the reporter, pretending to look critically at the mariner.

"Hey? Thunder! do you mean ter say I'm dirty?" blustered Captain Dodds.

"I certainly never should sail in any craft commanded by you. If we shipped a heavy sea it would form an island."

The captain sunk into a chair.

"Lord, Lord! ter think anybody should say that ter me!" he gasped.

"Miss Everley," sternly interrupted Nathaniel, "do not think you can avoid the point at issue by such attacks on us."

"I seek to avoid nothing, sir," was the firm response. "All you have heard is the truth. If it is unweelcome, it isn't my fault. You are absurd, while this man"—she turned to Captain Sam—"I do not know what to say of him, but one thing is sure: I know nothing of him or his real or fabled schooner."

"She's right, by gum!" declared the sailor.

"She ain't my honeysuckle."

"Why, you said she was."

"I take it all back. There is p'int's o' difference, now I look further; radical p'int's o' difference. She ain't the same one—I don't think."

"Are you not sure?"

"She ain't the same one. Still, there is a likeness; a most amazin' likeness, especially in the face and the figger."

"Where else could you expect likeness?"

"Dunno, by gum! Wal, anyhow, they ain't the same person, or, at least, I don't think they be. I didn't see the other gal plainly, an' I don't think I'd know her ef I see her."

"You have all along assured me you would know her wherever you met her, captain."

"Did I? Then I was a darned fool!"

"There is hope for this man yet; he knows his nature!" calmly remarked Adrienne.

"Miss Everley, you will gain nothing by such sarcasm," asserted the detective.

"No? Then please help me to gain—whatever you mean by that—by bringing into something more you want me to prove!"

Again Nathaniel flushed. He did not know why he did so, for he had seen sarcastic women before, and he hated himself for allowing this especial woman to see how sensitive he was to her thrusts; but he could not govern himself wholly.

With some resentment, but with perfect politeness, he replied:

"Madam, I am a detective engaged in an important case. An officer thus occupied is not usually careful of anything except his own success. Circumstances, correct or erroneous, have made you seem open to suspicion. Many men situated as I have been would have applied for a warrant for your arrest before now. I have not done it; I have subjected you to no unnecessary trouble or indignity. I have only done my duty."

His manner, if not his words, caused an immediate change in her own manner.

"Sir," she promptly replied, "can I aid you in this work?"

"I do not see how you can aid me further than to be truthful."

"I have been. As for the gentleman now with you, I never saw him before. As to the female reporter who was at Mr. Lynnfield's, whoever represented herself as Adrienne Everley stole my name and my identity. It was not I who was there."

Nathaniel was silent. In spite of all the evidence, he was for the moment impressed with the belief that she had told the truth.

"Then, how do you account for it all?" he inquired, breaking a long silence.

"The Lynnfields were deceived by an impostor."

"Whoever went there had a dress made especially for the occasion. Will you face the dressmaker and let her say if it was you?"

Adrienne sighed.

"As a favor to you, I will. After that, let this nonsense cease, if you please. Somebody ought to be able to settle the question of my identity. Let there be one more trial. Bring the dressmaker!"

CHAPTER XXV.

BY THE RIVER-FRONT AGAIN.

It was half an hour later when Nathaniel Cooledge again entered Miss Everley's rooms. This time Captain Sam Dodds was not visible, but in his place was a sharp-faced woman, who walked with an air of calm contentment, as if she felt that she was a factor in the world of no small nature.

They were met by the reporter.

Nathaniel waved his hand and then remarked:

"I think we may well dispense with undue ceremony here. We all know the work to be done."

"Let it be done quickly," requested Miss Everley. "Madam, did you ever see me before?"

The female visitor looked critically.

"Never!" she replied, deliberately.

"Did I ever order a dress of you?"

"Never!"

"Be explicit," directed Nathaniel. "If this is not the lady, what makes you sure of it?"

"I should never think of confounding the two. They are about of a size, though this lady is an inch shorter. Both are of rather more than ordinary figure, in regard to size, but this lady is the plumper of the two; the other one, the more masculine. This one would be easier to fit, on account of that same plumpness."

"But the faces?" pursued Nathaniel.

"The chief difference lies there. This one is as Nature made her; the other one was painted and powdered, though it was with remarkable skill. I suspect there was an object."

"What object?" demanded the detective.

"To make her look like this lady!"

"Indeed! Do you think so?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"The person who ordered the dress of me was one who need not have faulted the work Nature had done for her. Face and figure were excellent. Such being the case, I was surprised at the fact that she should 'make up' at all. More, unless I am in error she wore a wig."

"A wig?"

"Yes."

"Why should she do that?" asked Miss Everley, interested, at last, herself.

"I did not know then. Now, I suspect that she was a blonde, and that was why she had the wig. If I were to guess I should say she probably had fair hair under the dark wig, and that she had penciled her brows and lashes to carry out the deceit. In brief, though I had not before guessed it, I now think she was a blonde made to look like a brunette."

The dressmaker turned partly away, as if her work was done.

"You are positive," questioned Nathaniel, "that the two are not one and the same?"

"I am positive."

"Then your work is done. We thank you, and will now allow you to go. I wish to talk with this young lady before leaving."

"Naturally, sir."

There was room to suspect there was some sarcasm in this comment, but the dressmaker turned and went out with all of her prim dignity. Detective and reporter were alone.

Nathaniel had faith in the opinion of the dressmaker, and he regarded Adrienne proven innocent of connection with the Lynnfield troubles. He told her so now, and did what he could make amends for the mistake he had made. A measure of peace was restored, though it was not certain that Miss Everley forgave him fully.

"Miss Everley, did you ever hear of a child named Ad Bunker?" he inquired.

"I see you have learned something of my past life," she returned.

"Then you were that child?"

"Certainly."

"How do you happen to be Adrienne now?"

"It is simple enough. My mother's maiden name was Everley; I took it as one better fitted to my calling than the unromantic name of 'Bunker.'"

"How did you drift into journalism?"

"The word 'drift' expresses it well. I first became a typewriter. My mother, who was an educated woman, had taught me all she could at my age when she died. After that my fondness for books kept me in condition of irregular education, I may say. Finally, a lady who took a fancy to me, and who owned a typewriter machine, taught me how to operate it, and also gave me instruction in the mysteries of practical stenography. I learned easily and became a rapid operator. Then I secured a position in a business house, but my ambition soared higher. I wanted to write; to see my ideas

in print; to be more than a mere laborer, as I may say. I began in a modest way to write for the newspaper press, and, once started, I kept on until I secured my present position."

"And all this from the old days when you played on the piers."

Adrienne smiled slightly.

"The piers were once a familiar field to me. My father always provided me with a good home in those days, but the piers had a fascination for me. I went there many a day, and year after year, until I became too big."

As a last venture the detective remarked:

"I am told that you used to do tricks of sleight-of-hand for the amusement of the longshoremen."

The reporter's eyes opened widely.

"Somebody must have been drawing the long bow, then. I did nothing of the sort. I know of no tricks of the kind you mention, and I never did any."

"Did you ever know a person called Flip Fan?"

"No."

"Nor any girl who played on the piers, and did do such tricks as I have mentioned?"

"Never."

Nathaniel had asked enough, and, after some further conversation with the reporter, he took his departure.

"The scene changes," he murmured. "Ad Bunker was not Flip Fan, I am sure. Now, who was Flip Fan, and what has become of her? If Miss Everley does not fill the bill, who will? Yes, and what has become of Captain Sam Dodds's 'honeysuckle'? Did she really commit suicide at sea? Or, if she did not leave New York on the Tripping Mary, what has become of her?"

It was a perplexing question. The Lady of the Diamonds was a creature of flesh and blood, and one of no small amount of vivacity, if Nibsy and Andy Hicks remembered her aright. She could not fade into air. If she had remained in New York when the schooner sailed, where was she now?

"I think," decided Nathaniel, "that I will take a run down and see Nibsy this evening. I want to give him the task of learning just who Flip Fan is, or was. If the police records don't tell, perhaps some of Fan's old friends can. The story-teller in Dan Pratt's boarding-house remembered her well in certain ways, but did not know her name. I believe that Con and Aleck, my old acquaintances, will know. They mentioned her when they had me hung up on the wrong side of the pier, after trying to kill me."

The detective did not labor under the impression that Con and Aleck would tell willingly, but he believed that those who knew them might know Flip Fan.

It was after dark when Nathaniel reached South street. He looked for Nibsy, but saw nothing of him, so he interviewed Patsy, the night watchman. Patsy was not much more able to tell, but he mentioned several of Nibsy's resorts, and one of them impressed Nathaniel forcibly.

It was the restaurant where the youth had often gone to eat, according to his own statement.

He went there and found his friend just finishing a plate of fish-balls.

"Hi! is it you, old man?" was the greeting. "Fall to an' fill up with me. Here, Margery, another plate o'—"

"Not for me," interrupted the detective.

"Are your wants about satisfied?"

"I'm full clear ter my neck. Say, boss, wot's up?"

"Come out with me."

"I'm yer duffy-down-dilly," replied Nibsy, wiping his chin and rising.

Once outside Nathaniel proceeded to explain his wants, and the street-boy readily caught at the chance.

"I'll find out all ye want ter know," he agreed. "First, I'll git 'onter the pedigree o' Con an' Aleck."

"Don't you know their names in full?"

"No. I've scrapped with them all my life, but them an' me wasn't in the same set. I've heerd them called several different names. One feller told me they was brothers, an' it may be so, though I dunno. With such chaps as they be names go elastic,

an' git changed often. You see— Hullo! w'ot is it?"

"Keep quiet!"

"I will."

Nathaniel had seized Nibsy's arm and brought him to a sudden stop. The detective's excitement was natural—he had seen a familiar figure not far away.

It was John Berwick.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MYSTERY OF THE ALLEY.

JOHN BERWICK had been coming straight toward the other persons, and Nathaniel had been thinking of a way to avoid being seen in return, but Berwick solved the question for him. He turned to the right and disappeared.

"What is there?" asked the detective, quickly.

"Over yonder?" replied Nibsy. "Only an alley."

"Blind or open?"

"Open."

"I want to follow the man who has just gone in there."

"It's a tough place. If you go you want ter keep yer revolver out with its bark wide open. Men have been done up in there before now. Still, in we go, if you say so."

"Where does the alley lead to?"

"Anywhere you've a mind ter go. It is—"

"On the whole it is as well to wait here a little. The man is not one to follow a devilous path far, I think, for in this region he must know it would be dangerous. Come this way a bit—"

"Listen!"

"What?"

"Didn't you hear a cry from the alley?—sort of a yawp fer help, or somethin' o' that sort?"

"No. Did you?"

"I thought so."

"Then follow me. We will go in, and go ready for trouble."

Before the words were out of his mouth, Nathaniel was at the entrance to the alley. He had drawn his revolver, and he then had it ready for use. He was experienced in danger, but even he hesitated for a moment as he saw the somberness of the place. It was all that Nibsy had pictured it, and a dozen foes might lurk in the dark recesses.

"W'ot's that?" whispered the boy.

"I heard nothing."

"A gaspin' sound—"

"Come with me!"

There might be danger, but the detective would delay no further. He ran forward, trying to pierce the gloom wsth his gaze.

"Look alive!" cautioned Nibsy. "It is—"

Suddenly the speaker pitched forward and fell, and a wild grasp enabled him to seize Nathaniel, who was almost dragged down with him. Barely keeping his feet, the detective quickly lifted his companion up.

"Are you hurt?" the detective asked.

"Say, w'ot did I tumble over? It hadn't ought ter be there, an' I guess—"

Nibsy had been feeling around, and he now sounded a new note.

"A man!"

"Where?"

"Here on the ground. Don't yer see?"

Nathaniel bent and placed his hand as directed. He, too, distinguished the form.

"Berwick has come to grief!" he exclaimed.

"Strike a glim an' see who we've got. I reckon he won't tell us."

"Be watchful while I strike a match. I suspect that the workers of this mischief may be near even now. It is probable that our voices at the entrance to the alley accelerated their departure."

"Light up, anyhow, boss. We don't mind four or five bullets in our anatomy," cheerfully replied Nibsy.

Nathaniel drew the match across the stone surface with a steady hand, and they saw the man at their feet.

"Unconscious," muttered the detective.

"Likewise, belabored with clubs."

"He has been beaten."

"Oh, he's fell afoul o' some o' the toughs of this delectable region."

Nathaniel thought of the man he had seen enter the alley, but he said nothing.

The match had died away, leaving them in darkness.

"W'ot's the programme?" inquired Nibsy.

"We must care for this man. I take it he is a stranger to you as he is to me."

"Yes."

"He is a human being, and if we leave him the gang may return and complete its work. It is almost certain that we scared them off. Can you suggest a place to which we can take him?"

"Oh, as ter that, any o' the places around here will do it. We ain't all toughs on South street—not by a long shot! Hi! didn't he stir?"

"I thought he did."

They again bent over the stranger, and there were such very clear signs of returning consciousness that they set to work to aid Nature in its work. Nathaniel chafed his hands, and the movements of the man became more pronounced. After a few minutes he suddenly endeavored to rise.

"Be quiet!" directed the detective. "You are all right."

"What has happened?" mumbled the stranger.

"You have fallen among toughs."

"Ha! I remember; they lured me to an alley; they set upon me with clubs; they beat me without mercy!"

"Who were they?"

"I don't know."

"Do you live near here?"

"No, I live up-town."

"What were you doing here?"

"They sent for me, but it was a decoy; and all done to kill me, I do believe."

The stranger spoke with some force, but when he made another effort to rise, and, aided by Nathaniel, succeeded, he stood weakly and would have fallen but for the continued aid given to him.

Nibsy had been duly attentive to all around them, and he now spoke again.

"Boss, I ain't got no tremors in me legs, but my advice is that we hump ourselves out o' this. Them fellers may come back with reinforcements an' jest smash the whole of us."

"The suggestion is wise, and we will go. Where can we take this man so he will be safe?"

"I have a rig near here," replied the stranger. "Help me to that, and I will go home and never visit this part of the city again. Give me your arm and I will walk all right."

The plan was tried, and they moved to the mouth of the alley. It was then found that he was well covered with blood, but Nathaniel wiped it away as much as possible. A small smear was not strange to South street, and they were not likely to arrest attention.

The unknown was much stronger than was to be expected, and clearer of mind, too, and he directed them to where he claimed his horse was.

"Possibly it's gone before now," he added, musingly. "They told me where to take it, but I was not to be caught that way. I did not really expect trouble, but it was well to be on the safe side, so I did not take it where I was told to. It is all a question of whether they have found it. If they have, I guess it is good-by, horse."

"Why did they lure you here?" inquired Nathaniel.

"To kill me!"

"Why should they do that?"

"They were afraid of me, I guess."

"Then it was an old grudge?"

"Maybe. Ha! here is the rig; it has not been meddled with."

A horse, attached to a close-carriage, was standing by a lamp-post, and it greeted them with a whinny. The man seemed as much pleased as the animal, and he dispensed with all aid and stood caressing his dumb friend, wavering somewhat as he did so.

Nibsy King appeared to have become suddenly interested in horseflesh. He moved about, surveying the animal from all points of view, and wearing a thoughtful expression. Suddenly he burst forth:

"Cricketty-jim! I've seen this trotter before!"

The owner of the horse did not seem to notice the remark, but Nathaniel knew Nibsy well enough to give it full attention.

"What of it?" he asked.

Nibsy was about to speak, but he closed his lips, assumed a mysterious air and came close to the detective.

"Say," he whispered, "do you remember the Lady o' the Diamonds?"

"Yes."

"That was her rig!"

"No!"

"I say, yes!"

"Sure?"

"Dead sure!"

The detective was not blind to the importance of this revelation, if it was well founded. So much might come of it that he stood silent for a moment, whereupon Nibsy added:

"I hev a tolerable eye fer hosses, I reckon. You can't fool me on them when I hev a good look, an' I can't make no mistake on the quadruped the Lady of the Diamonds rode down ter South street, that night. This hoss is the hoss. See?"

Nathaniel turned toward the stranger again. He had become more than ever an object of interest, and there was hope of new discoveries. Acting on this belief the detective presently moved forward and again addressed their new acquaintance.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ACTORS OF THE EVENTFUL NIGHT.

THE owner of the horse gave his steed a friendly hug.

"They never meant we should see each other, old chap!" he muttered.

"You seem to like your horse," remarked Nathaniel.

"Yes, and I like my own life!" replied the stranger, bluntly.

"Naturally, sir; naturally. But as to the horse. Is he sound—"

"He was until a female fool banged him all to pieces—and it was that which got me into this scrape of to-night."

"How was that?"

"You see, I keep a livery stable. I let this horse to a woman a few nights ago. Of course she was to return him as people always do, but I never have seen her since. She did not return the horse, and though he came back himself before morning, he came with a lame leg that is not yet well."

"You say it was this which got you into the scrape of to-night. How is that?"

"It was like this. I let the horse to the woman. She was a stranger to me, and I was a bit shaky about letting the nag go, for I didn't know her, and she looked a good bit flip. Now, there isn't a person in the world that will use a horse so confounded rough as a flip woman—a woman who thinks she is a horseman, and likes to go fast. She has as much knowledge of a horse as I have of an angel—women just never were born to drive horses."

"But this especial woman—"

"Well, when I hesitated she referred me to a saloon-keeper near my stable—said she was a friend of his. I tumbled right into the trap. If she was a friend of his I wanted to oblige her, and it would look bad to doubt her and go and call on him. She got the horse."

"And then?"

"She went out. She was to get back by eleven, that night. She didn't come at eleven, nor at twelve, nor at one or two. She didn't come at all, but along toward morning the horse come alone. How he traveled the streets without somebody stopping him I don't pretend to say. He was so lame he hobbled like a clown in a circus."

"That was bad."

"It was villainous! Ever since I've been trying to locate the woman. I quickly found out that the saloon-keeper never had seen her; that was all a bluff on her part. I made a good deal of talk about it, especially as the horse did not seem to come out of his lameness; and I guess it got to her ears."

"And you were decoyed here?"

"Just so. I got a letter saying that if I would come here I could see her, and she would satisfy me, even if she had to buy the horse at what I considered his true value before he was lamed. Well, I came, and you have seen the result."

"Who met you?"

"A tough-looking fellow about eighteen years old, and he decoyed me into that alley,

and several men were in wait for me, and they just pounced on me and knocked me out."

"Didn't you see anybody but the tough young man?"

"No. Nobody else showed up until we were in the alley, and then, of course, I couldn't tell a white man from a black one."

Nibsy pulled at Nathaniel's sleeve.

"The Lady o' the Diamonds didn't suicide at sea!" tersely whispered the youth.

"What kind of a looking person was this woman?" inquired Nathaniel.

"She was a small, very dark damsel, with snapping black eyes and the quickness of movement of a cat," replied the stable-keeper.

Nathaniel and Nibsy mechanically turned their eyes upon each other. The description could not have been further from what they had expected. One fact immediately became impressed upon the detective's mind: either the Lady o' the Diamonds had engaged somebody else to get the horse from the stable, or the owner of the horse had a bad memory.

More questions were asked, but nothing was gained by it. The stable was up-town, but it was not especially near to Lynnfield's, and the horse had been taken away by the woman who hired him in the early evening.

All this baffled immediate discoveries, but was easily explained. The horse had been secured early and held ready for the hour when it would be needed. Possibly the Lady of the Diamonds had been aided by a female friend, though this was not in line with Nathaniel's theories; he was more inclined to think there had been a disguise, and that a poor memory on the stable-keeper's part had made a small woman out of one of generous size.

In the midst of these new perplexities one thing was clear-cut and not to be explained by any ordinary means—Nathaniel had himself seen John Berwick enter the alley just before the assault was discovered by the detective and Nibsy.

"If there was only chance in that," thought the detective, "it is a most remarkable chance."

The stable-keeper was improving rapidly, and he soon entered his vehicle and drove away. Nibsy noted the movements of the horse for a moment, and then decidedly observed:

"It's the limp, an' it's the hoss. Yes, it's the same one that the Lady o' the Diamonds had!"

Nathaniel engaged his companion in conversation for some time, and then they separated. The detective went home and to bed, and the actors of the eventful night were for the time forgotten.

The next morning he took his way to Lynnfield's.

He found Lynnfield, the count, Vivian, Robert and Barrington Oakes gathered in the parlor, and he joined them. The lovers were at one side of the room, and the rest of the party in another group. It was a peculiarity of Barrington that he never tried to mix with those younger than himself, and though he probably was considerably under forty years of age, he posed as a companion of "old folks."

On the present occasion he was talking of life in the armies engaged in African campaigns, and when Nathaniel assumed the air of a casual visitor, Oakes was invited by the count to continue his remarks.

"He was speaking of Mr. Lynnfield's deceased son," explained the count.

"My bosom friend in camp," added Oakes.

"Poor boy!" murmured Lynnfield.

"Being so intimate with him," pursued the ex-soldier, "I was knowing to all the details of his daily life."

Nathaniel noticed that the speaker's gaze wandered briefly to the young couple. He noted more. Vivian seemed suddenly to grow painfully interested. The detective thought she changed color, and she surely leaned forward as if to miss nothing.

"I could tell the minutest things of his camp-life," added Barrington Oakes.

Another glance. It seemed to thrill Vivian; she moved uneasily. Nobody noticed it but Nathaniel, but he missed nothing.

"His end was most sorrowful," continued the returned soldier.

Vivian made a swift, peculiar gesture. Was it one of entreaty? The detective thought it was. Further, it seemed to him that the dark-faced man was playing with her as he had done at the ferry-house. Nathaniel knit his brows. Vivian appeared averse to having her dead brother mentioned.

"Does the secret of Barrington Oakes's hold on her lie there?" wondered the detective.

The impassive face of the ex-soldier told nothing. If he was scientifically torturing the girl he did it with cool composure and stolid manner. He must have seen her anxiety, if it lay where Nathaniel began to suspect; but he showed no gloating over it.

Then, quietly and naturally, Oakes turned his back partially upon the lovers, and went on in his firm, impassive manner:

"Your son, Mr. Lynnfield, was a brave soldier and a loyal friend. I knew no other like him in the British Army. We used to mention him with pride as an American, and an example of the fact that English blood always remained heroic and good, even if transferred to other soils than that of the island we loved so well. Your son was a model in his camp-life, Mr. Lynnfield."

"I am thankful for that," murmured the father.

"When I return to the army I do not expect another comrade like him."

"Do you return to the army?" inquired Lynnfield, surprised.

"Yes; my trade is that of a soldier. I shall soon be with the British Army again—probably in Africa."

Barrington Oakes did not look at Vivian. Nathaniel did, and he saw her face light up with great joy. It looked as if nothing could please her more than to have him go to Africa.

"But, you have too much talent to be a soldier," remonstrated Mr. Lynnfield.

"Was that the case with Napoleon and Wellington?"

"I did not intend to decry your calling, Mr. Oakes, but, except in times of war, a soldier is dead to the world."

"He is very much alive in war," serenely replied Barrington. "Yes, I go back to the army, and that, too, soon. Within four or five weeks I shall leave New York. I go immediately to duty."

"A noble life," commented the count.

"I think it is. It is the life of men of brawn and valor."

Barrington Oakes was not praising himself, it seemed; he was as impassive as ever, and not in the least boastful. As usual, his tremendous strength of character showed in his self-contained manner.

"A remarkable man!" thought Nathaniel Cooledge.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHO CROSSED THE OCEAN?

BARRINGTON OAKES was in his best spirits, and, though he did not in any degree grow enthusiastic, he talked entertainingly for some time to his appreciative audience. Nathaniel Cooledge was content to be a listener, and he lingered in inactivity for some time.

Finally, Mr. Oakes apologized for monopolizing the conversation, and, though Lynnfield and Altamonte assured him he had been deeply interesting to them, he excused himself and went to his room.

The detective had a conversation with his employers which amounted to but little, and then he took his departure. He went home, and had barely arrived when Horace Black also appeared.

Nathaniel surveyed his aid inquiringly.

"As directed," began Black, "I have been to the office of the steamer company."

"With what result?"

"At the date of interest to us, the name of Barrington Oakes appears on the books."

"Further than that—what?"

"The books tell nothing."

"Then, you did not find another familiar name?"

"No, but I carried out your other suggestion. I have hunted up a passenger who came over at the same time. He remembers Barrington Oakes well."

"Did he get well acquainted with him?"

"No. He did not speak to Oakes at all, but he says that there is not a person who came over then but will remember Mr. Oakes well. The gentleman made himself a memorable figure of the voyage."

"It is not like Oakes to put himself forward."

"Wait! Oakes was as unassuming on the steamer as he is elsewhere, and made few or no acquaintances. He would have remained unknown to practically everybody there had it not been for an unlooked-for circumstance. You will be surprised to hear what it was."

"Surprise me, then."

"One day when the boat was nearing New York there was a sensation on board. A lady lost a valuable diamond pin. I need not dwell upon the small particulars, though they were told to me in detail; but she accused a young woman of the party."

"What party?" asked Nathaniel, with a start.

"I merely meant, of the boat's passengers. The young woman had been near her when the pin was lost, and was the only one who was near her. The loser declared the young woman had touched her as they sat together. She accused the young woman, and, soon after, the pin was found on the floor near where the accused girl had been standing."

"That might all have been chance."

"The course of events was more striking than I am now making it, with my present desire for brevity; I will enlarge, later, if you wish. The young woman was said to be a theatrical person, and there were many there who had a prejudice against her on that account. Matters looked very squally for her."

"It was at that moment that Barrington Oakes came into the game. He had not seemed to feel any interest in the case, but, now, quietly, calmly, and with the air of a philosopher and lawyer combined, he took up the matter."

"He surveyed the evidence with judicial closeness and pointed out that there was no proof; he called attention to the fact that the pin was recovered; he reminded them that it would be a bad blot on the reputation of the passengers, as a whole, if accusation was brought against one of their number for the theft; he dwelt touchingly on the youth and friendlessness of the girl accused, and then followed a plea which my informant characterizes as a masterpiece of eloquence."

"The accused was a woman! Should they tear down the fair temple of her reputation? Were they to blight her life? They did not know that she was guilty. If she were not, the charge would ruin her. If she was guilty it might be her first offense, and she might reform if given the chance. Must they ruin her?—a woman!"

Mr. Black paused, smiled and then more deliberately added:

"I have given you an outline of Mr. Barrington Oakes's remarks. I can give no more, for I was not there. My informant, however, says it was a masterful plea that the fellow made. You can guess the result."

"I am told that there was no doubt of the guilt of the girl, yet even the accuser weakened. She had been moved to tears by Oakes's, pathetic allusions to the trials and nobility, and so on, of her sex. With all the evidence clear against the girl she was allowed to go clear."

"And the name of the girl?" demanded Nathaniel.

"Paola Duquesne."

The detective made a gesture of anger.

"Bah!" he cried, "it is a name totally new. Yet," he added, after a pause, "that goes for nothing; it was to be expected."

"Naturally. Now, before this event nobody had ever seen Oakes speak to the girl. He was never seen to speak to her afterwards. The inference is—or was so to be held by the other passengers—that they were total strangers."

"Black, can this have been Flip Fan?"

"I strongly suspect it was she. Yet, how did she happen to be on the boat returning from England?"

"Is there more?"

"All through the voyage Barrington Oakes had a friend, or a young man with whom he was chummy. The man was known as Albert Gardner. He was a blonde, rather slight

of figure, pleasing of address, and polite and agreeable to all."

"John Berwick!" exclaimed Nathaniel.

"So I suspect."

"It looks as if Oakes, Berwick and Flip Fan came over together. We know where two of the three now are. Where is Flip Fan?"

"A suicide from the Tripping Mary."

"Do you think so?"

"No."

"Nor I."

"Flip Fan is a puzzle. She was substantial, it seems, and she cannot have faded into nothingness. Where is she?"

Nathaniel rose and walked the room for several minutes in silence. Finally he paused near his companion.

"Horace," he added, "I do not know of anything more, at present, in the line you have been engaged upon. Instead of this general work, I wish you to watch certain persons at Lynnfield's. You know what I mean."

"Yes."

"Attend to it with your customary skill. I suspect that a trick is being attempted. To-day Mr. Barrington Oakes announced that, one month from now, he should leave New York. I mistrust this frankness, and believe it may have been a device to throw me off my guard by an appearance of candor. It may have been a trick to cover a much quicker departure."

"I will bear this in mind."

"There is active work ahead of us now. Much valuable time has been lost by the unfortunate fact that my employers innocently placed me at fault in regard to Barrington Oakes. I was led to believe he was an old friend of Altamonte's, whereas I now find he is a mere soldier of fortune, and a new acquaintance. Watch well, Horace!"

"I'll try to do it."

Just then there was a tumult in the hall. Nathaniel had vaguely noticed that the street bell had rung, but he gave it no heed until the unusual noise followed. He rose and opened his door. A shrill voice sounded below.

"Darn yer ceremony, an' darn yer visitin'-cards! I never carried nothin' with me but the ace o' diamonds, an' now I ain't got that. Let up on yer ceremony, an' hustle me off ter Nat Cooledge's room. Him an' me are chums!"

The detective smiled. It was the voice of Nibsy King, and he went to the head of the stairs and called the youth up. Nibsy came two steps at a bound.

"Shoot that old gal that opened the door!" he cried. "She seemed ter think I was a burglar tryin' ter steal her good looks. Crickey! ef she lost them it would take a Lick telescope ter find the dratted things."

"I am sorry you were delayed, Nibsy, but it is all right now."

"No, it isn't all right!" declared the youth, flinging his hat down viciously.

"Why not?"

"I've been taken in an' done for."

"In what way?"

"Say, you remember the ring I loaned ye while you took it to somebody you wanted should see it?"

"Yes."

"Did yer show et ter a pickpocket?"

"No."

"Wal, by gum! that ring has been monkeyed with."

"What?"

"Ter-day I put on my best rags an' took the ring over ter Maiden lane ter git a value set onter it. W'ot do you reckon the figger was?"

"Three hundred dollars?"

"Ten dollars, by crickey!"

"Then there was a mistake."

"A mighty big one, fer that diamond ring has been swapped inter a paste by somebody. Who played fer a chump, Nat?"

"That ring is only paste, now!"

"Were you told that?"

"Yes, siree, by the Maiden lane sharp. I was mortally afraid ter go there with it fer fear he would think it was stolen property an' hev me jugged, but I needn't hev worried—not a bit. He said it was only paste, an'—"

"Nibsy, have you that ring with you?"

"Here she is."

Nathaniel snatched at the object produced, and then took it to the light. He did not need a Maiden lane expert to satisfy him on one point—first glance was enough to assure him that it was not the ring which he had taken from Nibsy and carried to Count Altamonte! It lacked the brilliancy of that ring and, he was ready to believe, was not a genuine diamond.

Perplexed and confused, he turned his gaze upon the boy.

"Is this the ring I gave back to you?"

"Why, sure."

"Where did you keep it from that time until you went to Maiden lane?"

"Right in that pocket, boss."

"To whom did you show it?"

"Nobody."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

Nathaniel was silent, and Nibsy added forcibly:

"No human got a squint at it but myself. I don't keep my treasure on exhibition like a Baxter street clothing store, with pullers-in ter do the biz. Nobody got eyesight on it, boss."

"Then how do you account for all this?"

"Nat, you got done up by somebody. My razzle-dazzle diamond was swapped for this stiff while it was in your hands; that's all."

"Impossible!"

"Did you show it ter somebody?"

"Yes."

"That's more than I did."

Nathaniel surveyed the ring again. He did not like to admit such a possibility, but he was quite as much convinced as he could be without positive knowledge. He had full faith in Nibsy, and he knew he was not looking at the same ring he had placed before Count Altamonte for identification.

Nibsy waited awhile, and then inquired quietly:

"Who seen that ring while you had it?"

The boy was not in the secret of the whole case, and Nathaniel could not allow him full information, but it sent his own mind back along the trail. Altamonte and Lynnfield had seen the ring; nobody else. It looked so absurd that they should play the trick that he had mentally declined to consider it.

"Nobody else saw it," he mused. "How then could such a substitution be made? Pickpockets walk the streets, but I decline to believe that any man or woman could take this ring out of my pocket there and replace it with a worthless imitation. I did not carry it long. Whom did I see while I had it? Did I—"

He stopped short, and with a start.

"Zounds!" he thought, "I went to John Berwick's room and smoked with him!"

The memory was like a flash of lightning. John Berwick was already under suspicion, and he was anxious, rather than reluctant, to believe ill of the young man. He thought he now had cause to believe ill. Berwick had called him to the room to talk of what then, as now, seemed to be trivial subjects, and the subject which furnished the excuse on Berwick's part had not been heard of since.

"Could he have purloined the ring as I sat in his room? Impossible! It was in my pocket. How could he get it? We smoked together, and he seemed devoted to smoking. He talked wisely of tobaccos and pipes. But he could not have purloined the ring—I think."

Nathaniel was not then frank with himself. He wanted to think ill of Berwick, but it hurt his pride to believe that the ring could have been stolen under his very eyes, and under such circumstances.

"Impossible!" he muttered aloud.

"Takes you a long while ter git the end o' the thread," put in Nibsy, quietly.

"Boy, do you know more?"

"Not about the ring."

"What else?"

"I have a bit o' family history from South street way."

"Give it to me."

Nibsy glanced wishfully at the ring, but his devotion to Nathaniel's interests was evidenced by his cheerful compliance at such a trying time for him.

"Quite a family tree I've made out. Nat, once upon a time, as they say in Grimm's Fairy Tales, there was a woman lived downtown who was named Martha True. She married a man named Yelton. He died. Then she married a man named Gurney. He died. Death is ketchin', so she ups an' dies. That disposes o' the old folks, but not o' the whole family—not by a plate o' fish-balls!"

"Now I come to chapter two. Martha is said ter have been a powerful smart woman. Some say she was once in a show, and it is also rumored that she an' Husband No. One, Yelton, was both show people, and jugglers o' some sort. Anyhow, Martha was smart as an Eyetalian laborer when the boss is around."

"Next we come ter chapter three. The first marriage she made panned out two kids. So did the second. Total, four kids. First marriage, boy an' gal; second marriage, two boys. Brains all went with the first set o' kids."

"The Yelton kids was corkers, they do say, an' they had all the world before them, chiefly because their mother's second matrimonial venture was not in love with the first husband's kids."

"Yes, old man Gurney was an unkind step-daddy, an' when he got up on his ear the under-pinnin' o' the house trembled and knocked its knees tergether. The result o' his tantrums was that his step-children spent a good bit o' their time away from home, an' was more fully street-kids than most children down our way be. Their mother was devoted ter them in a general way, but she wasn't no great shakes on motherly love, they do say. About all she tried ter teach them was the tricks o' the trade she had learned on the stage, sleight-o'-hand an' the rest. They got ter be mighty skillful at that, I am told. Them was the first husband's children."

"The second husband, old Gurney, was destitute o' brains, an' his kids was the same way. All had a sort of grizzly bear intelligence, an' they growed up ter be toughs, the second brood did; but they didn't learn no sleight-o'-hand tricks, the second brood didn't."

"When all the old folks was dead, includin' Gurney an' the mother, all the kids had ter shift fer themselves. After that South street ain't positive w'ot become o' the Yelton pair, except that the gal bloomed out as a pickpocket. She had always been light-fingered, and as she growed up she got worse at it."

"Her name was Fanny, but she got ter be known as Flip Fan, an' it was thought she would wind up in prison, though they do say that, at last accounts, she was on the stage as her mother had been, doin' tricks o' sleight-o'-hand. As fer her brother John, nobody knows his later history."

"The Gurney kids are still around the regions o' South street. You have met them, Nat; they are named Con an' Aleck!"

Nibsy ceased and took a seat.

The narrator had spoken in his characteristic way, but Nathaniel had followed him without difficulty, and he now had no trouble in understanding the interest Con and Aleck had taken in Flip Fan. The conversation they had held on the pier when the detective was holding to its supports, after they had tried to kill him, was plain.

If Flip Fan was their half-sister, and if she had made it to their interest to stand by her, it was natural that they should do so.

Flip Fan's history was all clear too, as far as her early life was concerned. She had drifted into sleight-of-hand and crime at one and the same time.

Nathaniel now believed that he knew who had stolen the Altamonte jewels, and, if she was a professional, it was explained how it could be done under the eyes of the guests.

The chance for her to get away with the jewels had been offered when Barrington Oakes called the attention of all to the painting on the wall. Had the opportunity come

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE HISTORY OF FLIP FAN.

NIBSY spoke with vehemence, and the detective was for a moment chilled into silence. He stood looking at the South street boy, and Nibsy looked at him with flaming eyes.

"What do you mean?" inquired Nathaniel, when he recovered his voice.

to her by chance, or was it a well-planned scheme?

And what had become of Flip Fan?

"I got a description of the Yelton kids," added Nibsy, after a pause. "Both was blondes, with yeller hair an' blue eyes."

Nathaniel thought of John Berwick. John had yellow hair and blue eyes.

"Cooledge," interrupted Black, "if these people were on the stage, is it not possible to trace their later course? We know that the girl was once the partner of a certain Signor Fezzetti, or some such name. Can't she be traced through dramatic agencies?"

"It shall be tried, and tried at once!" declared the detective leader.

CHAPTER XXX.

A NOTE OF WARNING.

BLACK was at once dispatched on his latest errand, while Nathaniel talked with Nibsy. The matter of the exchanged rings was mentioned further. When the detective first took the diamond he had assured Nibsy that if it proved to be as he thought the boy would not be able to hold it, or to expect more than its owner was willing to give; and Nibsy had accepted the decision composedly. Now, he was not feeling that he was a heavy financial loser, and he lamented the loss less than did Nathaniel.

As a result, the boy went home satisfied with his usage at Nathaniel's hands, if not with the loss of the genuine ring.

The latter was not long kept waiting by Black. The aid returned with his report.

"I have the missing links," he announced. "Well?"

"The girl who was once with Signor Fezzetti afterwards became the stage partner of a young man who was her brother, and they have since continued together."

"Where are they now?"

"In Europe."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Such was the report of the dramatic people. We may well believe we have later advices. Understand?"

"I surely do. Fan and her brother did go to Europe, but they returned. More, they came over with Barrington Oakes. More, it was Fan's old weakness for other people's property that compelled Oakes to come forward as her champion on the steamer. More, his yellow-haired companion of that voyage was Fan's brother. The trio crossed together, and, doubtless, with their crime at Lynnfield's well-planned. If we analyze the situation correctly, Oakes is the master-mind of the combination, and the others his aids—not that I would belittle their skill and brains. If John Berwick robbed me, as I think he did, his cunning is devilish!"

"We have two of them. Where is the girl?"

"True. Where is Flip Fan?"

Black shook his head.

"I suppose," he replied, "that you reject the possibility that she went overboard from the Tripping Mary, at sea, by accident or design?"

"Most emphatically!" declared Nathaniel.

"She did not sail on the schooner; you can set that down as positive."

"Then why was the schooner engaged?"

"For Flip Fan to go on. Why she did not go is not so clear, but it may be that she weakened on the voyage at the last moment. Anyhow, she did not go. Now, Horace, when she quietly deserted the schooner at the pier she still had the jewels in her pocket. Did she skip with them and beat her partners in crime out?"

"If so, why do Oakes and Berwick hang around at Lynnfield?"

"Possibly to keep suspicion off of themselves in the murder case, if they are guilty. However, I don't think Flip Fan played them false. Assuming that she did not, what is the situation? She left the schooner at a very late hour of the night with the diamonds in her pocket. That was a peculiar situation, if she had no refuge arranged. I do not believe she did have any? Then, what did she do?"

"The jewels must be disposed of at once."

"Yes."

"First thought would tell us that she fled with them, and, if she was an ally of the

men at Lynnfield's, thus cheated them out of their share of the proceeds."

"Second thought does not carry out the theory. I do not believe she played her allies false. Now, if she found herself in the streets of New York, at such an hour, with the diamonds to worry her, what would she do?"

Black shook his head in silence.

"As far as I can see," pursued Nathaniel, "her half-brothers, Con and Aleck, were not necessary to the original plot. Barrington Oakes is not the man to take in useless partners. Still, we know that Con and Aleck were soon aware of Flip Fan's being in some sort of critical situation—they tried to kill me because I ventured to go on the pier by which the Tripping Mary had once lain. What is the reference?"

"If I follow you, you suspect that the girl, after deserting the schooner just before it sailed, went to Con and Aleck."

"Just my theory."

"Then Con and Aleck are more than figure-heads in our plan of action."

"Decidedly so. They become more than mere toughs. Let us look to them, their habits and recent movements."

"Shall we begin now?"

"Wait until evening; there is other work for the day. For your part, you may drop around and see the precinct police and learn if they have made any advance in the matter of the murder. They seem wholly at a loss to know how Thomas Smith was killed, by whom and why. Learn if they have more light, and anything they can tell."

The partners separated, and it was near night when Nathaniel returned home. Black was ahead of him, and he had the old report from their associates on the police force—no clue to the slayer of Thomas Smith.

Nathaniel noticed a letter on his table and picked it up. It had come, it seemed, by special messenger, and the superscription made him smile. It was addressed to "Nat Colig." It was a decidedly abbreviated way of spelling his name, and it prepared him for more unique chirography. He found it inside when he read as follows:

"NAT:—Come down an' se me. There iz sumthin' up with Kon an' Ellick. I dunno whut. Hussel this way. Iff yu don't see me on sowth streaght go nere the restrunt whare I git fish-balz. Kon an' Ellick ete thare. Don't fale to come."

"GORGE WASH'TON KING,
"Wich iz Nibsy."

It was only a letter from a boy, but Nathaniel did not think of ignoring it. He knew Nibsy too well to imagine he would throw out false hopes or make a serious error of judgment, and he lost no time in getting under way. Black was directed to follow him, but to keep far enough away, so that their association would not be mistrusted. Then the detective leader set out for South street.

When that point was reached there was no sign of Nibsy, and inquiry at Patsy Greene's shanty developed the fact that the boy had not been around his usual haunts for some time. There was only one thing to do then, and the detective went to the restaurant.

He looked into the window secretly. Margery Hicks was serving two customers near the spot, and as one of them looked up to her Nathaniel saw a familiar face.

It was Con.

Scarcely had he noted this when a hand was laid lightly on his arm. He turned and saw Nibsy.

"They are feedin' up!" whispered the youth.

"Yes. What is up?"

"I dunno."

"But, you think there is something?"

"Sure! Come a bit away. Con an' Aleck are in there, an' they can't git out without our seein' them. Come a little back."

They went, and Nibsy did not delay with his explanation.

"Con an' Aleck hev been buyin' burglars' tools!"

"Have they? What do you infer from that?"

"I don't know. It means a break some where, but I don't know where. It may be that it ain't in our line. They hev bought tickets fer Chicago."

"They have?" cried Nathaniel, knitting his brows thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"Maybe they are going there to branch out as burglars."

"Just why I said mebbe it wasn't in our case. Still, Nat, it may be that the break will come before they take a train fer the Windy City."

"Have you any theory?"

"Not a bit. Hev you?"

"I am wholly at fault."

It was true; the detective did not see the explanation of the matter. If the two toughs were partialy in the confidence of Flip Fan they must know of a house up-town that would furnish rich plunder, but that they would try to get it after the alarms already received there was not likely. Nibsy had led Nathaniel to expect that the present case had connection with the old one, yet, how could it be so?

"The only way," added Nibsy, after a pause, "is to watch them."

"How long must we do that?"

"Ef the thing don't pop ter-night I am all wrong in my reckonin'. Con an' Aleck hev been busy as a gale o' wind in City Hall Park, an' I guess they hev their plum ready ter pick. All we hev ter do is ter watch them."

This might be little or much, but Nathaniel settled down to carry out the plan. It would not do to miss the chance; the buying of the burglars' tools meant something.

He fell back to see if Black was near. He was, and due directions were given to him. They were just over when Nibsy skurried back to his allies.

"The feed is over, an' Con an' Aleck are jest payin' their bill," he announced.

"Then the crisis is at hand."

"Right you be! There they come. Look alive!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

BURGLARS AT WORK.

CON and Aleck emerged from the restaurant. Nathaniel noticed that Con carried a small package under his arm, and when he remembered what had been said about the purchase of burglars' tools, he suspected that he knew the contents of the package.

The brothers did not show any uneasiness as to their surroundings, but, without a glance around them, turned to the right and walked off.

Nathaniel fell in behind them at a safe distance, and Nibsy followed behind him, with Black still further in the rear. Seen thus, the three pursuers looked like entire strangers to each other, passing quietly along the street.

Con and Aleck walked briskly and several blocks were soon traversed. They finally reached a business street where the stillness of utter quiet was accustomed to fall after dark. It was so now, and the whole block was untenanted, so far as could be seen.

The patrolman who had the beat was at some other point.

The manner of the would-be burglars became more wary, and Nathaniel increased his own vigilance as he received grounds for believing the break was to occur immediately.

Presently Con turned his head. At the first motion Nathaniel had leaped into a doorway, and he saw with satisfaction that his allies had not been less alert.

The three had sunk out of sight like mere shadows.

Con was apparently reassured, and he kept on—but only for a few steps. Both he and Aleck then turned and disappeared from view.

"An alley!" murmured Nathaniel. "An office in front. There may be a rear entrance. Is the event at hand?"

He was hesitating about following further, uncertain as to the chances of discovery, when Nibsy came quietly to his side.

"Nat, we are in fer it!" exclaimed Nibsy.

"How do you know?"

"Con was around here ter day, lookin' wise an' sayin' nothin'. That's the point ter be broke inter."

"Surely we can have no especial interest in this place."

"I ain't so sure o' that. I took a squint

here myself, when Con had gone. There is a big safe, or vault-like place, at the rear of the office. There is room ter keep a million o' money in it."

"We will see the thing through. How about the alley?"

"I guess there is a rear entrance."

"See Black and have him remain here with you. I am going to pass by and see what can be discovered."

Nathaniel proceeded to make a detour of the block. When he rejoined his companions he nodded quickly.

"Unless I err greatly they are at work. Black, how shall we manage it?"

"Give them a bit of time, and then close in."

The plan was carried out. After awhile Nathaniel pressed forward into the alley. The patrolman had passed, trying the front door as he went, but ignoring the alley, and there would be a lull in his quarter.

All was still in the aley. Con and Aleck had disappeared; the door was closed, and nothing told to the casual view that anything was wrong; but when the detective pressed closer to the building he saw through the shades that a light was burning within. It was barely visible, but it was there.

Clearly the burglars had made their entrance, and were engaged in their work.

The detective signaled to his companions, and all were soon gathered together. They consulted, and, as a result, the door was lightly tried. It proved to be fastened.

Nibsy's wits now worked well.

"See that transom over the door?" he inquired. "Do you mind, too, that the curtain is thin as gauze? It can be seen through, I'll bet. Give me a shoulder an' I'll hump up an' see w'ot kin be seen."

The plan was good, and it was tried immediately. Nibsy was assisted to Nathaniel's shoulders, and he found he had not misjudged the nature of the flimsy curtain. He could see the interior—not distinctly, but plain enough for his purpose.

The burglars were working at the safe, or vault; for it was more of the latter than the former nature.

He communicated his discoveries to his allies.

"Shall we go in now?" asked Black.

"No. Let them run their string out. If it is a common burglary, we want to know it; if there is anything special, we must know it."

The watchers waited. Either the vault was not so very strong or the burglars were old hands at the business, for not over twenty minutes had passed when Nibsy announced suddenly:

"The door is open!"

"See what they do next," directed Nathaniel.

"I kin see lots o' papers in the vault, but they do not pay attention to them. There is a roll o' greenbacks, but they jest swipe it in quick an' say nothin'; they don't seem ter care whether it is much or little."

"Watch on!"

"I will. They fire things all over creation. They toss papers an' packages about—they don't open none of the packages. They ransack everything."

"They hunt for something special!" murmured Nathaniel.

"They hev about gone all through—Hi! Con grabs somethin' an' begins ter dance. He's all broke up with joy."

"What has he got?" eagerly asked Nathaniel.

"A little box only a few inches long an' wide. It is— Say, boss, kin that be—"

Nibsy had broken off and then began to speak anew with equal eagerness, but the detective suddenly jostled him.

"Down!" he commanded.

Nibsy leaped to the ground.

"Burst in that door!" ordered Nathaniel. "It can't be very firm if it has once been picked. Burst it in, and prepare for a fight. Now, all together! Throw yourselves bodily against the door! Now!"

The three solid masses of flesh were thrown forward. The door flew open. The detective party rushed into the office.

Con and Aleck were still engaged in jubilation, but they stopped short when the intruders appeared. Con still stood with the box clasped in his hand, and they were fully caught in the act of burglary, if nothing

more. The dismay pictured on their faces was impressive.

"Surrender!" commanded Nathaniel.

"Spotted!" exclaimed Con.

"Yield!" added the detective. "You are surrounded and escape is impossible."

If the whole of this assertion was not true the fiction was justifiable, but it did not accomplish its purpose—they had to deal with men not to be frightened by anything, it seemed.

"Break through!" hissed Aleck.

"Go!"

The brothers spoke almost in concert, and they acted with equal promptness. A headlong rush they made, and as the intruders blocked their way there was a shock as if rival animals had met.

The detective party was forced to give ground for the moment, but they rallied speedily and stood up before the attack. Savage was the struggle which followed. The brothers had been accustomed to such experiences all their lives, and they knew well how to use their strength. Add to this that they fought with absolute fury and the situation can be imagined.

For a moment the result was in doubt, but Nibsy spoiled the chances of one opponent by tripping him neatly and falling heavily on him, and in a short time both had been mastered.

Furious but helpless they remained under the hands of their foes.

"Irons!" tersely directed Nathaniel.

The wrists of the burglars were quickly encircled, and then the last doubt was removed.

"All done!" cheerfully observed Nibsy.

"You dog!" hissed Con, "so you are responsible for this, be ye?"

"Your own sins are responsible for it!" retorted Nathaniel. "Be cool and take your medicine."

The mysterious box had fallen to the floor, and it now became as much an object of interest to the detective as it had been to the burglars. He lifted it and at once tried to open it. It was secured, and he hesitated to break the lock.

He noticed that Con and Aleck eyed it with intense interest still.

"There's a name on it," remarked Nibsy.

"So there is. 'Miss Fannie Yelton.' That tells something, and I think we are anxious to know what is inside."

"Say, boss," eagerly put in Con, "ef you'll let us go we'll pay ye a good round sum."

"Have you a key to this box?"

"Naw. Why should we have?"

"I thought it possible that your hopeful sister had given it to you."

"Me sister? I ain't got none."

"How about Flip Fan?"

"Never heard of her, boss," replied Con, with cool persistence.

"My man, you will find it to your advantage to give us the truth about this. You are in the toils. Will you put a part of the blame where it belongs, or will you shoulder all? Speak out!"

"Old man," answered Con, with ready tongue, "I don't know a thing you are talkin' about, but as fer the truth o' this job, maybe you think you kin make me squeal. If you do you are off yer gear. I ain't no squealer. See?"

Nathaniel looked at the bull-head of the speaker and gave it up for the time; there was too much nerve and obstinacy back of Con's stand. Nevertheless, he resolved that one of the brothers should yet confess. He took Black to one side.

"Horace," he observed, "we want to work this game just right. Our men are going to the Police Headquarters to-night, but if the newspapers get track of the truth I shall fail in all my plans. The truth must not come out; the friends of these precious young burglars must not know what has become of them. If I catch the status of affairs, it is not likely anybody was told of this break. Good! From this moment Con and Aleck disappear from view."

"It's a still game?"

"Yes."

"The plan is good."

"Of course we want this box as evidence of what they tried to do. We will take it and open it at Police Headquarters. Now

to summon the patrolman and have this office protected from further raids."

"Send Nibsy."

"Yes. He will do as well as anybody. Dispatch him at once. As for me, I shall not take my eyes off from our game, nor my hands off of this box. Send Nibsy and let this affair be settled at once. We have bagged out our game. Let us see how big the game is."

CHAPTER XXXII.

ALL BUT ONE LINK.

THE next day as Nathaniel Cooledge sat in his private room a servant came to announce that a lady wished to see him. No name was sent, but when the lady appeared she proved to be Adrienne Everley.

The detective first looked surprised and then rose with cordial politeness.

"Miss Everley, I am pleased to see you. I have not always been the most agreeable of acquaintances. Will you allow me to make amends for past mistakes?"

He set a chair for her, and she smiled pleasantly enough.

"Suppose I take my revenge now, and snub you?" she suggested.

"Madam, you are a business woman, and you know what discipline is, and what duty requires."

"That is right, and we will omit the sulking and the quarrel. Permit me to ask if you have the murderer of Thomas Smith yet?"

"I regret to say, he still has his liberty."

"And the stolen diamonds?"

"Are not in the hands of their proper owners."

"Mr. Cooledge," added Adrienne, with sudden emphasis, "I am interested in this case."

"As a professional woman?"

"Less that, I fear, than as a woman who has been wrongfully accused."

"You are no longer under suspicion."

"So I believed, but I want more. When the real criminals are found there cannot be even the shadow of doubt as to my standing."

"There is none now."

"That does not satisfy me. Not to dwell on mere hopes let me say that I have what may, I think, be regarded as evidence of practical value. I have been looking into the case. My connection with newspaper work does not require me to hunt murderers, or to do the work usually set apart for men. Neither am I a freak journalist, like some women who are engaged in the occupation. My line is legitimate and, I may say, womanly. Lately however, I have made a new departure."

"And that?"

"Has been to hunt for the Lynnfield criminals!"

"So I have a rival in the business?" returned Nathaniel, with a smile.

"No. I seek only to vindicate myself."

"You are already vindicated."

"By theory. I want unassailable proof, and I am seeking it. Now, to come to the point. You remember the dressmaker episode?"

"Yes."

"And that the mysterious woman who had a dress made with a pocket did not have the dress sent home, but came with a boy to carry it when it was done?"

"Yes."

"I have found the boy."

"Ha! is that so?"

"Quite true, Mr. Cooledge. It seemed a useless attempt to find the boy, but I undertook to do it. Armed with a good description from the dressmaker, and aided by certain remarks she had recalled as made by the boy when at her house, I began a search which has been successful; the boy is found."

"What could he tell?" inquired the detective, eagerly.

"Practically nothing," Adrienne answered, "but when I found him I learned to what place the dress had been taken. That meant a good deal. Inquiry there developed new things, and now I will tell all I learned."

"A certain Mrs. Diskman keeps a small boarding-house. To this house there came a few weeks ago a young woman who gave the name of Miss Ray. She remained for some time and was considered a good boarder. She had two callers and no more, both men,

One was comparatively young, slender and blonde-haired; the other was nearly forty years old, tall, dark and rather severe of look.

"These men came to see her occasionally. All three were quiet and unostentatious. When in the house they talked on commonplace subjects, but they occasionally went out, and were then lost to sight, of course."

"This went on until after the dress was brought home. Some of the women caught on to the fact that a new dress had made its appearance, and, naturally, they wished to see it. They did not succeed; Miss Ray evaded showing it."

"She made foes by this—what woman could patiently endure such a rebuff as to be refused permission to look at a new dress?"

"Miss Ray was immediately voted 'queer' by the good ladies of the boarding-house."

"One evening she went out. No one can say positively, but it is believed that she wore the new dress. Nobody saw it, however. She never has been back. There is but one thing to add to this—the evening that she left so unexpectedly was the same on which the wedding at Lynnfield's was to be."

"You think," replied Nathaniel, "that the inference is clear?"

"Is it not?"

"I think it is."

"Miss Ray was the person who impersonated me at Lynnfield's. Who were the men who visited her at the boarding-house?"

"Can you give me fuller description of them?"

"I asked all there to describe them, and the result of their combined efforts makes for us two well defined men. Here they are!"

The reporter went over the various points of each, and Nathaniel could not doubt that they had been Barrington Oakes and John Berwick.

Adrienne did not press him to state whether he knew who her men were, but briskly hastened to another point.

"Miss Ray left all her belongings at the boarding-house. It was no great sacrifice. With the exception of three dresses and the few articles imperatively needed for daily use—a comb, a brush, and so on—the room had nothing, and her trunk was found to be weighted with useless substances. More, all the dresses were nearly new. To prevent her being traced she had had them made for the occasion, and they were abandoned when the crisis had come. Is not that your view?"

"I think you are right."

"Now, where is the woman?"

Adrienne leaned forward and her manner was eager, at last.

"Have you any clue?" asked Nathaniel.

"None. And you?"

"None!"

Nathaniel made the reply almost apathetically. The reporter looked at him sharply and appeared uncertain whether to accept the statement as truthful or not, but she expressed no doubts.

"She was a creature of flesh and blood," pursued Adrienne.

"Very much so."

"She cannot have turned into air."

"No."

"Has she fled with her ill-gotten gains?"

"I have had hold of the same string you have found, and the riddle is one which has perplexed me not a little. Where is the other woman in the case? I wish you would tell me."

"Are you sure you have no suspicion?"

"If I have, it is vague and intangible."

Adrienne was silent for a moment. She could not expect a detective to tell his whole case to her, but she felt that she ought to be given light as to the woman—and she believed Cooledge knew more than he had told. She finally decided to let the subject drop.

"How about the men who visited Miss Ray?" she inquired. "Do you want the inmates of the boarding-house to see any particular man, or men, known to you?"

Nathaniel shook his head.

"The day of identification is past. What I want now is light on the period after the guests arrived at Lynnfield's. Tell me of that period and I will thank you."

"At present I can do nothing of the sort, but I will search. I am not usually deeply

interested in murder cases, but this one is different. I want to know all about it, and I shall hunt for the evil-doers of that night. I am going to see my name cleared by somebody's efforts, yours or mine."

"You are wholly free from suspicion, Miss Everley."

"Not yet, in law. That is why I want the real criminals found; it is why I am resolved they shall be found!"

Adrienne spoke with emphasis, and Nathaniel began to admire his new aid. He encouraged her all he could. She lingered for some time longer, and then took her departure.

The detective began to walk the floor thoughtfully.

"Who struck the fatal blow?" he muttered. "It was not Barrington Oakes; he surely was with the guests. John Berwick was with them during the later evening, and the Count Altamonte swears he was there when the murder is supposed to have been done. However, I remember, well back in the investigation, that Barrington Oakes spoke of Berwick being in conversation with him and Altamonte, when the crime was announced, as well as for a long while before it. The count was slow to concur, then. Since, he has been positive on the subject. Has he, unknown to himself, been talked into a false impression?"

"Or was Berwick really there? Did Flip Fan, herself, strike Thomas Smith down? If so, she has the arm of an athlete and the heart of a tigress. As to the strength—well, she was a circus-performer. She may have had more muscle than women usually have."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FROM THE WATERS.

NIGHT! A party consisting of Nathaniel Cooledge, Mr. Black and Nibsy went out on a pier. In the dock lay a schooner, and as they neared it they were met by Captain Sam Dodds.

"All serene," remarked the mariner, cheerfully. "I've sent all the lads ashore, though I didn't know but the old gang would come and do me up, as they tried to do before."

"I promised you they would not," replied Nathaniel.

"That you can't be sure of, until they are in prison."

Nibsy grinned as he remembered what had become of Con and Aleck. No newspaper had announced the haul made by the three when Con and Aleck came to grief, and even the best friends of the toughs could no more than suspect that something had befallen them.

Captain Dodds was not enlightened, and the four went to the Tripping Mary.

"Is all ready?" inquired Nathaniel.

"As far as I know, it is."

"So be it!"

With this declaration Nibsy began to cast off his clothes, until the supply was soon scant.

"Now ter biz!" he added.

"What apparatus do you need?" asked Captain Sam.

"My legs an' arms."

With this the South street boy began to clamber over the rail.

"Take no risks," cautioned Nathaniel.

"If anything goes wrong, come to the surface and consult with us."

"Nothin' will go wrong with me. Hi! there, old dock, you an' me hev shaken fins more than once. I come ter yer embrace now. Hold me close ter yer heart!"

Nibsy turned a grinning face toward his friends for a moment, and then released his hold and slipped quietly down into the water. He disappeared from view.

"Hope he won't meet with any mishap," observed Captain Dodds, soberly.

"Never fear."

"He ain't a sailor."

"He is a South street boy, and that means he is well at home in the water. He would not be up in his class if it was otherwise. Do not fear for him."

"Messmate, do you really expect much from this?"

"It all depends. We have found a witness, as before stated to you, who avers that he was around here when the Tripping

Mary sailed on that eventful night. He says he saw a woman leave the schooner and return to the street. He avows that she wore a black dress. If that is so, she disposed of her special dress while here, for she carried no parcel with her. Result, we infer she sunk the cast-off garment in the dock."

Captain Dodds shook his head.

"It won't be there now; the tide has sucked it out long ago."

"That is our one fear. Still, all probabilities fail at times. The dress must have been weighted. It may have clung because of that weight, or it may have caught in the supports of the pier."

"Your boy is staying under water surprisingly."

"Yes."

"You don't suppose he has overdone the job and succumbed to the difficulties of remaining under the surface?"

"I certainly do not. He isn't the person to fail in his attempts."

All bent forward over the rail. The water rippled on in the old way and gave no sign that it had received a human being into its embrace. It was a dark and pokerish place, and the detectives, who were but ordinary swimmers, began to feel that, in their opinion, it was no trifling matter to go down into the gloomy depths.

If Nibsy had vanished from life and gone into nothingness he could not have disappeared from their view more completely.

Everybody began to feel anxious about him.

"He was only a landsman," reminded Captain Dodds, soberly.

"He said he could swim well."

"Oh, but no landsman can do that."

"Say, Cap, I'll swim you a match. Is it a go?"

The trio, startled by the voice, wheeled suddenly. Just behind them, safe on the deck, was Nibsy, his mouth expanded in a grin of mischievous pleasure.

"Here is the dead man!" he added, coolly.

"You rascal! how did you get there?"

"Climbed up on the off-side o' the old scow—meanin' the Gallopin' Mary."

He was looking maliciously at Captain Sam, but the sailor took the slight composedly.

"You have a parcel, I see!" exclaimed Nathaniel.

"Yes. I've been up on Sixth avenue, shoppin' sence I left you. I would 'a' been back before, but I had ter wait for my change."

Nibsy gave his trophy a toss in the air and then caught it deftly as it fell.

"A gay an' gaudy gown rescued from the salt sea waves," he added. "Et was sorter snarled up in a mess of other things, an' it would hev been a muscular tide that would hev carried it out ter Sandy Hook or the classic regions of Gowanus."

Nathaniel caught the parcel quickly and looked briefly at it.

"Down to the cabin!" he exclaimed.

They went, and the dripping package was hurriedly unrolled. As this was done there was a slight "thud!" and, looking down, he saw a knife sticking in the floor. It was a most impressive sight, with his knowledge of the case. Nibsy caught it up.

"That's an ugly-lookin' thing!" he declared. "Why should a fair damsel carry sech a toad-sticker?"

"Bad for my honeysuckle!" murmured Captain Dodds.

Black secured the knife, and Nathaniel silently shook out the clinging folds of the dress. It was the same gay affair that was remembered so well by the mariner, but the whole party made one discovery in concert.

Nibsy thrust his fingers toward a certain point.

"Red paint or blood?" he inquired, quickly.

For a red smear was on the dress near the bosom, and the action of the water had reduced it to a mere shapeless blotch, it was noticeable enough for all to see readily.

"Crickey! I guess she committed suicide before she walked away from the schooner!" exclaimed Nibsy.

Nathaniel's gaze strayed to the knife. He

dropped the dress and picked the weapon up. It was an ugly-looking thing, indeed, and just the article one would choose, of the kind, for a telling blow.

His mind did not work slowly then and a theory came to him. If the red stain was blood, and he was not inclined to doubt it, the matter could be explained under the theory that the knife had been thrust into the bosom of the dress when the weapon was wet, after a tragedy.

He did not care to consider it too much then, and while Nibsy and Captain Dodds speculated over it he stowed the knife away in his pocket.

"Captain," he then pursued, "is that the dress your passenger wore that night?"

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"I think I be."

"All right then. She discarded it and skipped on you. Of course the dark dress she wore away was a part of the things which had been brought on board at the time she was booked as a passenger with you on the voyage."

"Do you gain much light from this discovery?"

Nathaniel smiled meaningly.

"A perfect blaze of light," he replied, quietly.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ANOTHER SECRET MADE KNOWN.

THE searchers left the schooner in good spirits, a mood which was shared by Captain Dodds. The master of the Tripping Mary found it impossible to forgive the people who had sent him on an aimless cruise, and, though he had not been taken into Nathaniel's confidence, he had faith in the detective's pledge that he should be satisfied for his troubles.

Once on the street Nathaniel gave the dress and knife to Black and sent him home. The leader then accompanied Nibsy in another direction. Nathaniel had not had his supper, and, though he did not expect to secure a very luxurious repast, he had decided to take Nibsy's advice and go to the restaurant in South street which the boy frequented.

"You'll find et prime," asserted the boy. "You kin git A1 fish-balls, clams that'll make the hair grow on yer teeth, an' plum-puddin' with diamonds inter it an' icicles fer frostin'. Then there is Margery Hicks ter wait on ye—oh! you can't git nothin' like et at Del's, now I'm tellin' of yel!"

"I can well believe it," agreed Nathaniel.

"It's straight. Here we be. Come in!"

They entered and took a seat at one of the tables. Fresh-faced Margery took their order, and then they sat back to wait. Nibsy looked the picture of contentment.

"Great place this. Many a time I've eat here, an' so has Con and Aleck. They won't come no more this grass."

Nibsy was fully of recollections, and he did the talking for the time being, but stopped short when their orders were filled. They proceeded to eat heartily, and had stowed away the first course without losing their appetites.

"Hi! there, Margery!" called Nibsy, "bring us two plum puddin's."

"Make it only one," amended Nathaniel, "and bring me a cup of coffee, instead. That will satisfy me."

The girl proceeded to do as directed.

"I remember the time," added Nibsy, leaning on the table, "when I made up faces in this shebang, once, ter Con. an' he throwed a water-glass at me. Great old boy, Con was, an' I'd like ter hev one more scrap with him before he goes ter Sing Sing. You see—"

The boy was talking with animation, but he stopped suddenly. His companion had abruptly doubled up his fists and half-started forward, and Nibsy's gaze followed the keen regard he saw Nathaniel bend on something or somebody in front of them.

He saw a man very unlike the usual patrons of the restaurant. A few feet away stood a person tall of figure and erect of carriage. He was looking past them, and seemed trying to discover a certain, but to Nibsy, unknown object.

The boy caught the detective's arm.

"Nat, Nat, w'ot is up?" he demanded.

"Be still!" directed Nathaniel.

"W'ot do you see in that pirate ter excite ye so?"

"Nibsy," the detective answered, "go light; that is the very man we are hunting! Not a sound; he must not see us. It is the ally of our mysterious woman."

Nathaniel had made no mistake. Barrington Oakes was in the restaurant! It was the last place where his hunter would have thought of seeing him, and where his purpose was not at first clear. Then a suspicion flashed over the detective. He had expected the friends of Con and Aleck to be puzzled by their disappearance. It seemed that one man was doing more—Nathaniel quickly guessed that Barrington Oakes was searching for the missing longshoremen.

Cooledge settled back and shaded his face with his hands.

Oakes, an impressive figure in the place, remained motionless. He allowed his gaze to wander all over the restaurant, and everybody at the various tables was scanned, but nothing told that he was successful.

Margery, on her way with the pudding and the coffee, delayed for a moment to raise an inviting finger to what she supposed was a patron, but Oakes ignored her.

Wheeling, he walked out of the place without a word to anybody.

"I concealed my face just in time," thought Cooledge, "and, luckily, though I have my plainest clothes on, I am not dressed as Con and Aleck dressed."

If Oakes had seen nobody he wished to speak with, he had not been lucky enough to fail to attract attention to himself. A seedy-looking man near the door rose and followed him out.

Just behind Nathaniel was an open window, and he heard a voice sound outside.

"Say, boss, wait a bit!"

The detective cast a look back of him and saw that the seedy man had accosted Oakes. The latter turned upon him angrily.

"I have nothing to give you!" he curtly exclaimed.

"Boss," asked the seedy man, "do I look like a beggar?"

"You do!"

"Wal, I ain't, an' don't you think it. I'm a swell, I be. See? I earn me mon when I git any, an' I kin earn et now. Do ye want news o' your brothers?"

Oakes's irritation gave place to a nervous start—something nobody would have believed him capable of.

"What's that?" he replied.

"I know yer brothers, ye see."

"I have no brothers."

"How about Con and Aleck?" asked the seedy man.

Barrington looked hard at the speaker.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"See here; I used ter know yer wife, Flip Fan!" whined the stranger, coaxingly.

"What nonsense are you getting off?"

"Et may be nonsense, but I know you married Fan Yelton, sister ter Con an' Aleck Gurney."

"Jewhillikens!" muttered Nibsy, from the restaurant.

Nathaniel was speechless. He had not expected this. Oakes had cast a wary glance around. While the detective could see his face the latter was, himself, invisible, and it looked as if everything was safe.

"I'd like to know," pursued Oakes, "upon what you base such wild talk. If you claim to know so much, where did you get your points?"

"From Con. Ye see, it was like this: Con an' me was in this very beanery, yender, havin' a feed. Con had a jag on, he did. Jest then we seen you pass by. Con looked, an' says he, 'Fly low; there's a man who probably wants ter see me. He mustn't do et, fer ef he sees me with a jag on, he will cut up rusty.'"

"You dreamed this."

"Not much! Says I, 'Who is he?' an' says he, 'He's an English nob that has married me sister Fan!' That was you, boss."

Oakes did not reply at once, and the seedy man added whiningly:

"I'm a friend o' Con's, I be. It was him who said you had married his sister, Fan; I didn't say so. Con couldn't lie about it.

Fan is a nice gal, an' you've got a treasure; you hev!"

"This is all nonsense!" repeated Oakes, curtly. "Con was bluffing you. Still, I know Con, and I would like to see him. In fact, I have been searching for him to-night. Where is he?"

"He lives down at Dan Pratt's."

"He is not there, and has not been seen there of late. Can you tell where he is? If so, you shall be well paid."

"Wal, boss, I ain't seen him nor Aleck lately, but they will be around somewheres. Jest you come with me an' I will try ter find him."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No."

"Then you can do me no good. I do not care to tackle more vague chances. Say, my man, this is all rubbish about my being married to Fan Yelton. Con was stuffing you. I am much obliged to you for your good intentions, and I will give you a dollar on one condition."

"Great Scott! w'ot is the condition?" gasped the tramp.

"That you never repeat this silly rumor which connects me with Fan Yelton. I never saw her but once in my life, and I am a single man. Do not be absurd. Just drop the matter, now and forever, and I will give you the dollar."

"Boss, I am dumb until I die. I don't care a rap about it—all I spoke ter you fer was ter git a drink. Whoop! that's a big dollar! Old man, you are a brick!"

"You will be still about the foolish rumor?"

"Until death!"

"Very well; see that you do as promised. Of course it is not true, but I don't want idle rumors to float around. Now, good-night!"

Oakes turned and walked off down the street. Nathaniel rose.

"Be we off?" demanded Nibsy.

"Yes."

"Good! Shoot coffee an' puddin' when there is a bigger snap!"

They hurried to the street and cautiously followed Barrington.

"Say," added the boy, "that was a corker!"

"What?"

"That this feller is married ter Flip Fan."

"Do you believe it?"

"Why, sure! Why else is the gay lad huntin' fer Con an' Aleck? He wants ter see his relation. Hi! he will have ter look long ter git a peep at them. Darned ef this ain't a big advance in the game."

"You never spoke truer," agreed Nathaniel. "Con's sister is Oakes's wife. That explains a good deal that has bothered me before. It clears the dust away, and the game is about ready for bagging!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

A PECULIAR OCCURRENCE.

WHEN Cooledge called at the Lynnfield house, the following morning, he met the master of the place in the hall.

"I was just going out for a moment," explained Lynnfield. "I trust you can wait for my return?"

"If you wish."

"I will be gone but briefly. Pass right up-stairs and wait in the usual room. You are likely to have it to yourself. If you care to see Altamonte or Barrington Oakes, you will please summon a servant and have your wishes attended to."

The detective did not know that he desired to see the men mentioned, so he went up with the intention of remaining inactive until Lynnfield came. The room was always an irritating place to him, and never more so than on this occasion.

He walked the floor and vainly wished the walls could be made to speak and tell all the secrets that had occurred under the roof.

While he was thus occupied he heard voices in the room beyond.

"I am entirely at your service."

"I will not keep you long."

Nathaniel lost his absent-minded air. The speakers were Vivian and Oakes! It was the former, it seemed, who had called for the interview, and her manner was singularly curt and business-like for her. Mr. Oakes seemed to be quiet and deferential.

"Will you sit down, Miss Lynnfield?" he went on.

"I prefer to stand," sharply answered Vivian. "I will not keep you long, I say."

The detective had gone to the hanging curtains, and he had full view of the two persons in conversation. As something of value might be coming, he did not scruple to keep his place and listen. He noticed that Oakes had an air slightly uneasy, while Vivian was changed from the timid suppliant of former days to a severe-faced woman.

"The tables appeared to be turned!" murmured Nathaniel.

"I want," continued Vivian, "to speak of the past and the present. Do you know what I mean?"

"No, Miss Lynnfield."

"Why did you lie to me about my brother?" vehemently demanded the girl.

"Lie? Pardon me, Miss Lynnfield—"

"I will not pardon you; the pardon is not deserved. You told me, in confidence, as you termed it, that my brother died in Africa, in disgrace. You said he was shot as a traitor, and for various other things you mentioned."

"Again, pardon me—"

"Why did you do it?"

"I felt that some one might well know it, so as to keep it from your poor father—"

"That excuse is worn out. You have used it too much. You told me a parcel of lies about my brother, and then, urging me not to let my father know of the disgrace—so you called it—you used it to terrorize me and gain a hold on me."

"But, Miss Lynnfield—"

"You interfered shamefully in my private affairs. People think I was strangely weak and vacillating in regard to my marriage with Robert Houston. Why was it? Because you held me under a rod of iron; because you first commanded me to break off the engagement, and then bade me go on with it. You made me your slave through absolute terror. You said you loved me, and bade me obey you and you would serve me well—that you would ask no reward except to see me happy, and that, though you loved me, you would not claim me. All this you did, and you made me waver like a reed in the wind. Why?"

Barrington Oakes shrugged his shoulders.

"Because," added Vivian, "you threatened to tell the alleged truth about my brother's death to all, and thus crush myself and my father with the disgrace. Oh! coward, coward!"

"Is there more?" inquired Oakes, calmly.

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I know now that you were a liar!"

"Choice words for a lady to use."

"At least they are true. Here! See this paper! It is an English daily, with chronicles of the doings of the British Army in Africa. If I had thought to hunt for it before, your reign of terror over me would have been short. Here—here, sir, is the true story of my brother's death!"

Vivian's eyes flashed, and, as she held the paper in a shaking hand, she advanced upon her enemy. Barrington Oakes stood in calm unconcern, wholly indifferent, it seemed.

"The story is the same you told to my father," added Vivian, "and I now know that my brother died a natural death, with all honors attached to his name."

"I always said so—in public."

"What did you tell me, privately?"

"That he died disgraced—if you remember correctly."

"My memory is very good, sir; I remember that, and I remember how you worked upon me, making me seem weak and uncertain, and making my life a torment. Why did you do it?"

"I really don't know, Miss Lynnfield."

"It is false, sir; you know all about it. Now that I have learned what you are in part, I wonder what there is that I do not know. Sir, I believe you to be a villain in more ways than one!"

"Have you a list of these ways?" calmly inquired Barrington.

"I have not; but, one thing is sure: if you were not a friend of Count Altamonte, I would make your infamy known to everybody."

"Possibly it would be well not to tell the

count," admitted Mr. Oakes, with a lazy smile.

Vivian relapsed into silence and watched her companion. She gained nothing by it. Barrington was never more at ease, it seemed, and not the slightest waver was visible.

"I don't understand you!" she finally murmured.

"Maybe there is a trace of mental derangement in it," suggested Oakes. "It is sometimes hard to account for it when a good man goes wrong."

A retort trembled on Vivian's lips, but it was checked as John Berwick entered the room. Vivian became duly mute, and when, soon after, Mr. Lynnfield and Count Altamonte entered, the scene was over for the time. The girl escaped to her room, and all the others gathered where Nathaniel had been waiting.

Barrington looked hard at the detective, but he had to deal with a man who could be as impassive as himself, and learned nothing by the scrutiny. The arch-plotter had no means of knowing when the detective came into the house, and probably settled down to the hope that it had been but a short time before, and that there had been no listeners to the late interview.

General conversation followed. Lynnfield and the count were very anxious to know how the case was progressing, and Nathaniel was quite equal to the emergency.

He talked consolingly, but held out no new hopes.

Altamonte finally tired of the aimless conversation, and asked permission to look at the morning paper. He was busy for several minutes, and then he suddenly broke forth with the exclamation:

"*Mon Dieu!* this is strange!"

"What?" inquired Lynnfield.

"A news item."

"Does it concern our case?"

"Oh! no, but listen, listen! It is most singular to me. Listen!"

He read aloud:

"An incident which is likely to be a tragedy comes from a freight-yard in Jersey City. Among the cars attached to a train which arrived at the place yesterday was a close box-car, which did not seem to have been dispatched in the usual manner. Investigation showed that it was a car which had been in the same yard several days before, and had been missing for some time. It was then supposed to have been accidentally included in a train sent to the West, and that it had been sent empty. Such proves to have been nearly the case, but not literally true.

"When the locked car was opened a man was found inside.

"He was a pitiful sight. He was reduced nearly to the point of starvation, and was little more than skin and bones. His weakness was such that he could neither sit up nor speak.

"It is supposed that he entered the car in Jersey City when it was there before, and that the door was accidentally locked on him, and that the car was then included in a train being made up, and the hapless wretch was off on a long journey without food or drink. The car was very strong, making sounds from within difficult to hear, and as there was a long journey without stop it is easy to read between the lines.

"Literally imprisoned in the car, he could not escape of his own efforts, and it seems that all of the shouting and pounding for help which he unquestionably made arrested no attention.

"For several days he has been whirled over the rails suffering agony and unable to help himself.

"He was taken to the hospital. Owing to his great weakness nothing has been learned of him, and even his name is unknown. He is young, and dressed in what was a suit of fine clothes before his captivity in the car began. His hair is blonde and his eyes blue, and he must have been rather a handsome fellow before his terrible trial. It is believed he will die."

Altamonte looked up from the paper.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he exclaimed, "how very terrible! Think of the poor wretch being locked up this so long, and starved to death by inches. It is awful, awful!"

"And mysterious," added Lynnfield. "How could such a man be locked up in the car originally? What was he doing in a freight-car? It seems most mysterious—What?"

Mr. Lynnfield broke off suddenly. John Berwick had slipped from his chair to the floor and lay in a faint!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

JOHN.

THERE were quick-witted men in that little party, but even the most alert of them sat still and dumfounded then. It is not usual in a party of men to see one of their number fall out of his chair in a swoon.

John Berwick lay perfectly still and his face was white. Amazing as the fact appeared, he had really fainted.

Nathaniel was the first to move. He leaped up and then hurried toward the fallen person.

"Our help is needed here," he asserted.

Barrington Oakes suddenly sprung up, blocked the detective's path and exclaimed:

"It is nothing; some little accident. He is all right. Here, John!—up with you! No tricks on us, now; you are all right. Bestir yourself!"

It was an imperative command, but it did not work. Berwick did not move or open his eyes.

"*Mon Dieu!* he has fainted!" cried the count, with the faculty that some people have of expressing a fact after everybody knows it.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Oakes. "Nothing of the sort. He is all right. Up with you, boy!"

"You will have to reconcile yourself to the fact that he has fainted," drily observed Nathaniel.

"Bah! not he! If he is unconscious, it is because he has smoked too much. I have told the boy he would kill himself with cigars. The weed is fatal to persons of nervous nature."

Lynnfield took his turn with advice.

"Bring a glass of water and dash in his face," he advised. "Let me open his coat—"

The speaker's hands touched Berwick's neck, and Barrington Oakes pushed him aside.

"I will care for my friend," decided the tall man, promptly. "Have no fear about him. I will carry him to his room—"

"I will help you—"

"No! I need no help."

Oakes had his burden, and was stalking away.

"A doctor—"

Mr. Oakes looked over his shoulder.

"None is needed. If you want to make an enemy of John, call one in; otherwise, refrain. John hates doctors. I say I will see to him; nobody else need worry about him."

Carrying his burden with perfect ease the speaker crossed the threshold and disappeared.

"Well, that is a novelty!" declared Lynnfield.

"I never saw a man faint before," agreed Altamonte. "It is most remarkable—most remarkable."

"Not at all," coolly answered Nathaniel. "Mr. Oakes has explained that Berwick smokes too much. I am not a doctor, and I do not know if smoking to excess usually works that way, but we have Oakes's word for it, in this case. Depend upon it, gentlemen, he knows Mr. Berwick better than we do."

"But to faint—to faint!" murmured the count.

"Is nothing among highly-strung people. If Mr. Berwick is a bit out of health we ought not to comment severely or unkindly—"

"Surely not, monsieur!"

"Then let us speak of something else and forget his weakness. Ill health is enough without thoughtless remarks."

Nathaniel waved his hand and disposed of the subject. He did not allow it to come up again. They talked of trivial matters for awhile; then the detective took his departure.

Not until he was near the end of the block did his dignified air suffer any impairment. Then he smiled slightly.

"John Berwick swooned when he heard the story from the Jersey City freight-yard," he murmured.

Another block in silence; and then he added:

"Not a pleasant journey that the fellow took. It is easy to see that he suffered keenly. I have heard of like cases, though I imagine this one has some new features."

Whatever the features were, he did not find it hard to understand the journey of the car. It had probably been included in a lot that went a long distance. When it was found at the other end that this particular car was not consigned to them, and that it was without freight inside, and was locked, it was promptly sent back whence it came. Thus, the man imprisoned inside made the journey both ways, and at such times as he was able to call for help the motion of the train prevented him from being heard.

Just then Nathaniel came upon Mr. Black standing at the end of the block. The leader accosted his ally.

"Close in one block," he directed. "Take your stand at the corner and carry out previous instructions."

"All right!" replied Black.

Nathaniel turned at right angles and went on until he encountered another man lingering at a corner.

"Move one block nearer," he ordered. "Get to the position and carry out previous instructions."

"Very well, sir," replied the man, moving on.

Nathaniel had been to the west and the south. He went to the east and the north. Two other men he found there, and to each he gave the same directions the first two had received. As a result the four moved close to the house occupied by Walton Lynnfield, but kept to the corners of the block, and maintained an air of indifference.

In Lynnfield's house all went on as usual, as far as could be seen. It was not long before John Berwick showed himself. He met Lynnfield and replied to the latter's anxious questioning with a laugh and a joke at his own late weakness. In one sense he appeared to be fully recovered, but his face was still pale.

He soon returned to his room and was closeted with Barrington Oakes.

Below, Lynnfield and Altamonte talked together. Neither was any longer young, and they found their pleasures in matters not exactly in line with the amusements of young people. They had discussed the events of the interrupted wedding night until they were tired of it, and had fallen back on politics and the glory of the Altamonte family.

"There was never but one black sheep in the family," declared the count. "Bad blood will tell, and when my cousin married a plebeian the usual results followed—but let me not speak of it."

"It was sad," sighed Lynnfield. "I trust I am American enough not to be supercritical, or to decry honest worth even in the poor, but a knave is alway objectionable, whether he is rich or poor."

"My cousin married a knave—a poor knave—a fellow who never even used her well. And to think that she was the daughter of the noble lady to whom the Empress Josephine gave the precious jewels! Ah! well, my cousin and her knave husband are both dead now; let us not speak of them."

Thus the two men babbled on. Once they wondered transiently what Barrington Oakes and John Berwick were doing upstairs, but they gave the question little concern.

Later they sat down to a game of chess, and were thus engaged when, unknown to them, John Berwick left the house and walked away toward the west. He moved with quick steps and his physical weakness had disappeared. His manner betrayed some nervousness, however, and it was possible that it was an index to his real mental condition.

When he reached the end of the block he met Nathaniel Cooledge.

"Going out?" asked the detective, calmly.

"Yes, for a short time," answered Berwick, without stopping.

"I dislike to trouble you, but will you go back for a few minutes and get me another of your cigars? I like that brand, and it will soothe my nerves a good bit."

"Go to the house, Cooledge, and I will soon return. I am merely going to do a little shopping."

"Can't you make a martyr of yourself and get the cigar first?"

Berwick had paused of necessity, and now looked Nathaniel in the face. His own gaze wavered a trifle, and his color seemed to change.

"Do you go there," he suggested, "and ask a servant to help you to a handful of the cigars. I will join you presently."

"But, my dear fellow, I can't smoke all alone. Hang your shopping! It will keep; only women have to shop right on the tick of the clock. Come on, Mr. Berwick; let us have the smoke, for I can spare but little time. One cigar, and then I shall have to do other business."

The blonde keeper of good cigars moved restlessly. Perhaps he was not over his late swoon; he did not appear at ease. Perhaps, too, he felt that cigars were not good for him then. Be that as it may, he was annoyed and nervous.

"Shall we turn back?" added the detective, lightly.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CRASH!

JOHN BERWICK made a gesture of irritation.

"Have it as you will," he replied.

"Thank you!" answered Nathaniel, serenely.

It was a gracious acknowledgment on his part, but it did not affect his companion. Neither did the latter warm up as Nathaniel talked on briskly until Lynnfield's door was reached. Then Berwick made a noticeable effort and grew more cautious.

"Come right to my room," he directed. "I shall be glad to help you to a cigar of good quality."

"I have a weakness for smoking," admitted Nathaniel, smiling. "We are all victims to some bad habit, possibly; mine is smoking. It is nothing short of bliss to bury one's self in smoke and mellow odors, as I may express it. Life ought to have something for us all—I take cigars as mine."

Berwick really smiled. The detective did not seem to have a thought outside of the matter in hand, and it may have pleased Berwick to notice it. They were soon in his room and smoking with zest, one would say.

Nathaniel talked briskly, and Berwick was not far behind. As the cigars burned near an end the detective suddenly observed:

"Your health must be poor, Mr. Berwick."

"Not at all."

"You fainted this morning."

"Kindly pass that by; I guess I have been tied up too much in the house. It's only a temporary let-down in condition. It makes a man feel devilish ashamed, though!" declared Berwick, with a slight swagger.

"How does it make a woman feel?" inquired Nathaniel.

"Really, I can't say."

"You ought to know."

"I had? I don't know why."

Nathaniel blew out a cloud of smoke and looked for a moment at the sky outside the room. Then his gaze came swiftly back to his companion.

"Because, he replied 'you are a woman!'"

Berwick's face fell and the color fled from his cheeks. He looked at Nathaniel in the plainest kind of alarm.

"What?" he gasped.

"I said you were a woman."

"I am—Nonsense! Don't be foolish. Oh! you mean that I act womanish."

It was a brave muster of words, but they did not come bravely. The speaker seemed to have an obstruction in his throat, and his speech was thick and unnatural.

The detective tossed his cigar away.

"I mean," he distinctly explained, "that you are Flip Fan, the pickpocket!"

Then speech utterly failed the young person. With white face and startled eyes he—or she—stared mutely at Nathaniel.

"Let us end this," suddenly and sharply

added the detective. "Mrs. Barrington Oakes, the game is played to an end! You have had good cards and handled them well, but the play has gone against you. Flip Fan, you can return to the garments of your sex as soon as you wish. You are my prisoner!"

A blaze of defiance came to the round face.

"What do you mean by such rot?" was the angry query.

"Be calm! It is useless to deny anything, for the evidence is positive on all points. You are my prisoner!"

This time he reached out to take her by the arm, but her period of weakness was gone. Her hand slipped into her pocket—it came out holding a revolver. She turned it quickly upon the detective; she pressed the trigger—but not enough to cause a discharge.

Lightly the detective had leaped forward, and, arresting the pressure, wrested the revolver away.

"Come with me!" he added, holding fast to her arm.

There was a brief struggle, but it showed her the folly of resistance. She succumbed, and, though unusual courage was mixed with her air of despair, she made no demur as he led her down-stairs. She had relapsed into silence and machine-like submission.

Nathaniel led her to the parlor. First view of that section made her eyes dilate. The room was full of people, and in the center was to be seen Barrington Oakes with Detective Black by his side.

Everything went to show that the avalanche had struck there, also, and the last remnant of her color fled.

Nathaniel, leading her to the side of one of his men, paused and looked around. He saw officers and others, the central figures, besides the conspirators, being Altamonte and Lynnfield. The count, nervous and frustrated, addressed Nathaniel hurriedly:

"Monsieur Cooledge, what does this mean? Barrington Oakes is arrested—"

"He is."

"Why?"

"For stealing the Altamonte jewels!"

The count leaped up like a gymnast.

"What?" he almost shrieked.

"I present to you the persons who stole the diamonds, Barrington Oakes and John Berwick."

"Impossible, monsieur; impossible!"

"It is all a plot on the part of the detective too stupid to find the real thief!" coolly declared iron-nerved Barrington Oakes.

"A mistake!" asserted Altamonte; "a terrible mistake—"

"Do you know who Oakes is?"

"He is a gentleman—too much of a gentleman to steal—"

"He is the son of your cousin, and grandson of the lady to whom the Empress Josephine gave the jewels. You know the history of that branch of your family. Your aunt, the recipient of the jewels when Josephine gave them away, had but one child, a daughter. This daughter married a man of whom her family did not approve, and she was disinherited. She and her husband are dead. She had but one child; here he is!"

Nathaniel pointed to Barrington Oakes. That person smiled with his usual coolness.

"A pretty tale, but all rubbish!" he declared. "All rubbish I can stand this charge, because I can easily prove my innocence, but I caution all here not to take any faith in this sensation-craving detective's statements."

Nathaniel calmly turned toward the door, made a motion, and other officers entered. With them came a prisoner—Aleck of South street. He slouched in with an air of unconcern, but the so-called "John Berwick" no sooner saw him than she reached out her arms, and was plainly going to make a plea for silence when Barrington Oakes checked her.

"Let these fellows have their day," evenly spoke the arch-plotter. "All we need to say now is that we are innocent of all wrong doing. We will prove it, later."

His nerve was not gone, but Nathaniel ignored him utterly.

"My man," he said, to Aleck, "tell us what you can about this affair. Who are these people?"

Aleck stretched out a grimy hand, pointing to "John Berwick."

"That's me sister Fan, an' that is her husband, de Duke o' Somethin'-or-other; I forget w'ot. Yes, an' dey are de stiffes w'ot robbed dis roost. See?"

"This is an era of confession," added Nathaniel, quickly, "and all is clear. Let me explain from the start."

"Count Altamonte, I have mentioned your cousin who married beneath her, and thus lost the support of her family. Barrington Oakes—let me still call him by that name—is the son she left. Shut out of the wealth that his relatives enjoyed, he became a fugitive, sharper and soldier by turns. Always more or less hard up, he longed to replenish his funds, and nothing galled him more than to know that, by law of inheritance, he would have heired all the jewels given to his grandmother by the Empress Josephine had not his mother made a mesalliance and been cut off from her inheritance by the grandmother."

"He never forgot this; he never ceased to long for the money which the jewels represented."

"Four months ago he was in France. He had just severed his connection with the British Army. There he met two Americans, brother and sister, who had gone to Europe to show their skill as sleight-of-hand performers. He fell in love with the sister; he married her. Then the three entered into a combine to secure the jewels."

"False names were assumed by all. Your relative became Barrington Oakes; the male sleight-of-hand performer became John Berwick, and his sister—the wife of Oakes—did not fail to find a name for herself. She did not wish to be known under that name most familiar to her old friends—Flip Fan, the pickpocket."

"Not to dwell too long on this let me say that, once here, Oakes ingratiated himself with the Count Altamonte, who never had seen him, and that the plot was brought to a close. Now, how did they do it?"

"Flip Fan was at the wedding as a female reporter. When the jewels were exhibited, Barrington Oakes called the attention of all to a picture on the wall. It was a pre-arranged scheme, and when it was done Flip Fan did the rest."

"With her skill as a sleight-of-hand performer she secured the jewels in short order, secreted them in her pocket and closed the cover of the casket so their loss would not be detected."

"It was not detected; the scheme was successful, and she got away with the treasure. This is how the diamonds were stolen!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MYSTERIES EXPLAINED.

NATHANIEL was holding his audience spell-bound. Even the prisoners were deeply interested, eager to learn just how much he knew. He went on quickly:

"Once clear of the house Flip Fan fled to the piers, using a horse that had been prepared for her. It had been planned that she should flee from the country on a schooner, and that her companion-conspirators should join her as soon as the wind blew over. She did go on board the schooner, but she was not in love with the plan, and, at the last moment, she weakened and deserted the craft."

"That left her alone in New York at night. She had but one thing to do; she did it. She went to Con and Aleck Gurney, her half-brothers, and they gave her shelter. The next day she deposited the stolen jewels in an office down-town, subject to her call."

"Con and Aleck had not been taken into this last move, but they happened to get clue to it, and, subsequently, they tried to rob the depository. Instead, they were captured in the act. Here are the jewels!"

The detective suddenly revealed a box, and, as he opened it, a flood of minute rays shot out in a way which made Count Altamonte leap to his feet with a wild cry.

"The diamonds!" he shouted. "The diamonds are back!"

Nathaniel gave him little time to exult. Hurriedly the detective pursued his story.

"Let me return to the flight of the thief from this house. Flip Fan's retreat had

been all arranged, and, the moment she was free from observation, she set out to escape by the rear door. According to the pre-arranged plan, too, her brother was near to guard her retreat. All would have gone well, had not Fan stumbled in the basement hall. A shower of jewels rolled out on the floor as she fell."

"Thomas Smith, a servant, happened to be there and see this. He was quick-witted enough to understand that something was wrong. He seized Flip Fan. John Berwick, seeing this, yielded to impulse and buried his knife in the servant's back, killing him almost instantly."

"Flip Fan was a natural acrobat, and, with her brother's aid, she vaulted over the fence of the back-yard, and thus gained the next house. Through this, by previous arrangement, she gained entrance to the street. She fled in the schooner, as before told."

"Berwick had not meditated murder, but his nerve proved good when he found he had done one. Fan had hid the bloody knife in her dress, and as Berwick had few blood stains, he boldly re-entered the Lynnfield house."

"The dire deed was done, but when Berwick had time to think, he lost some of his nerve. He determined to flee. He bade adieu to Fan and Barrington Oakes and started."

"He was going to take a regular train to Jersey City, but, when he reached the depot, guilty fear made him think himself watched. He hurried to the freight-yard for cover, and, entering a car which stood empty on the track, he was locked in by an employee who did not know he was inside."

"Soon after the car was attached to a train and sent off on a long journey, and Berwick, unable to get out or to make his plight known, was kept there until he nearly starved to death. It was the irony of fate that the car came back to Jersey City, after several days, and, being opened, he was found inside, almost dead from want of food and water. He is now in the hospital, and will die. This, in brief, is the story of this Sharper's Combine."

Nathaniel paused and turned his gaze upon the person who had been known as John Berwick. She was lying back in Barrington Oakes's arms, motionless and with closed eyes."

"Oakes, is your wife ill?" inquired the detective.

"She has only fainted," calmly replied Barrington. "Do not, I beg of you, let such a small thing as our welfare interfere with your story. You are interesting. Pray proceed!"

"I have little more to say. Flip Fan's failure to sail on the schooner left her in New York still, and as she dared not continue in her own character, and was reluctant to leave her husband—she and Oakes are really attached to each other, it seems—she took advantage of her brother's flight and her strong resemblance to him and assumed male garments. She has ever since passed as the genuine John Berwick. She is yonder; not Berwick but Flip Fan."

Count Altamonte ceased adoration of the recovered jewels long enough to look at Fan and mutter:

"This is amazing, amazing!"

"A very pretty story!" remarked Barrington Oakes, outwardly unmoved. "Pray, how will you prove it all?"

"Aleck Gurney has confessed—"

"Does that prove all?"

"And so has the real John Berwick. He is dying; he has explained all; his confession has been witnessed, sworn to, and is now in my hands."

Barrington Oakes shrugged his shoulders, and then calmly rose and laid his wife on the sofa. He then faced Count Altamonte.

"Kinsman," he observed, coolly, "I trust you will not believe all that has been said of me. You know"—here there was a slight trace of a sneer—"that the family honor is dear to both of us, especially to me. I have all my life had reason to bless the Altamonte name, defrauded of my rights as I have been. I should have been a rich man but for the fact that my mother dared to marry a person who was poor, and that my father was a knave. Such trifles should not have kept me out of the family fold—when I loved you all so much!"

The count had no reply ready.

"I confess with shame," added the chief plotter, "that I am a kinsman of this titled person. Such being the case, you had better take me away. I do not like present company; this lordly count contaminates the air!"

With this final defiance he turned again to his unconscious wife, gathered her in his arms, kissed her and added:

"No more can be brought against us than robbery. If the charge can be established we will serve our time. When it is done we will be reunited, for I will not desert the woman who is my accomplice and my wife!"

"Your love for her should have kept you out of crime," replied Nathaniel.

"Save your pity, sir; we want none of it. We can endure what fate has in store for us. One thing more. Allow me to congratulate you, Mr. Cooledge, on your success in this matter. I will do all I can to secure your promotion."

Nathaniel was at a loss for a moment, but he quickly retorted:

"Of promotion I am not certain, but I am sure of you! Men, take charge of your prisoners!"

In the days that followed, Barrington, Flip Fan, Con and Aleck were duly convicted and sent to prison for terms appropriate to their crimes. Fan's brother recovered from his long experience with starvation, and finally cheated justice by dying in bed.

Robert Houston and Vivian were married, and the latter wore the historic jewels on that occasion. Count Altamonte returned to his own land, happy. There is joy and peace in the Lynnfield home.

Nibsy King asked for no more in the way of reward than to help his detective friend in future cases; but, out of Lynnfield's abundant store the South street boy was well paid for his aid on the occasion here noted.

Adrienne Everley was the recipient of a present, too. She remains still a reporter.

Nathaniel Cooledge won glory enough for any man when the full case was made plain, but he took it with his usual coolness and continued his work in the old detective line.

Barrington Oakes and Flip Fan accepted their imprisonment with the philosophy of their cool, strong natures, and there is no doubt that the time will come when, free from confinement, they will be reunited. No one can say what their after-history will then be.

THE END.

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